



# **The institutional relationship between the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority: overlapping roles and challenges of coordination**

**Discussed in the open debate - Challenges Facing the Palestinian  
Political System**

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This paper will attempt to provide a theoretical framework analyzing the role of the PLO and PA, including comparisons, the problematic overlapping of their roles, an analysis of challenges and the scenarios where one is encompassed by the other. It will also present and review the transformation in the structure of the PLO and the foundations of the PA's role based on the Oslo Accords, including these transformations post October 7, 2023. It will present the recommendations of Palestinian civil society organizations (CSOs) to help promote an integral approach and avoid any collision between institutions and the roles and powers of the PLO and PA.

The main topic of this paper is based on a review of the major documents, agreements and academic studies published on the subject. It also utilizes interviews with politicians and academics, well-informed in the topic of this research paper.\*

## Historical background

The PLO was established in 1964, to combine the quest by the Palestinian political elite to renew representation and leadership, a decade and a half after the 1948 Nakba, and the desire of the Arab political system to rid themselves of the burden of managing the Palestinian file and placing it in the hands of the Palestinians. It was also the result of political disputes between Arab regimes on the vision, goals and regional, international and political alignments, a response to the global context, represented in the growing roles of global liberation movements in the “third world” and the presence of the nonaligned movement and role during the Cold War. Newly-founded Palestinian resistance factions then joined the PLO, giving it a new identity following the 1967 war and the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Three decades would pass between the establishment of the PLO and the PA. The PA was the result of a series of transformations following the PLO, most significantly: the departure of the PLO from Jordan in 1970; the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel in 1978, which marked the exit of the largest

Arab country from officially being at war with Israel; the exit, in large, of the PLO from surrounding countries following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982; the second Gulf War and the PLO's alignment with the losing side and the subsequent consequences within the Arab political context, particularly pertaining to the damage to its relationship with Arab Gulf countries; Arab division following the war; a bolstered American presence in the region due to the prominent US role in the invasion of Iraq following its occupation of Kuwait; the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of American unipolarity; the 1987 Intifada and the emergence of roles for relatively new political Islamic movements ( Hamas and Islamic Jihad), in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the impact of this on the exclusive representation of the Palestinians by the PLO.

## Spaces and roles

The varying contexts during establishment and development of the two bodies, led to a difference in roles assigned to the PLO and PA. This is regardless of the fact that the PA was born from the belly of the PLO and is considered one of its representative bodies in the West Bank and Gaza Strip until the Palestinian state is established, supposedly after the interim phase of the Oslo Accords ended on May 4, 1999. This did not happen, as a result of Israel's policies on the ground, in parallel with the negotiation tracks in Madrid and Oslo, in addition to its strategy of procrastination and circumventing agreements, which prolonged the interim period indefinitely.

Still, despite the differences in their roles and even though the PLO represents a political and moral home for the Palestinians everywhere, the shift of its entire leadership to the West Bank and Gaza led to a clear duality of roles between official positions in both the PLO and PA. In other words, PLO positions overlapped in the Palestinian political hierarchy with senior positions in the PA. Prior to the inception of the PA, the PLO in exile focused on political, diplomatic, revolutionary and mobilization matters, rather than matters pertaining to the Palestinians' daily lives such as health, education and economy. This was due to the fact that there were other institutions such as UNRWA or those affiliated with refugee host countries to carry out this role since the PLO lacked sovereignty over the territories of these operations where it would have performed these state-like tasks.

## **Problematic relationship**

The problematic relationship between the PLO and PA is the disparity between the structure and roles of the two institutions, beginning with the circumstances that prevented the PA from being an extension or reflection of the PLO inside Palestine. In addition, was the growing strength and presence of the PA financially, politically and representatively at the expense of the PLO, which turned the latter into a merely formal political framework reflecting traditional representation of Palestinian factions under the umbrella of the PLO. Meanwhile, the Palestinian political arena has so far not been able to invent the appropriate tools to enable the PLO to create strong, effective and vital forces in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and among Palestinian communities, camps and groups abroad.

## **Problematic and controversial**

A series of events and developments have led up to this moment. The 1948 Nakba and its subsequent dismantlement of the conventional Palestinian leadership, led to the reestablishment of a new leadership represented in the PLO in 1964, its combative character following the 1967 defeat and then the inclusion of emerging factions. Then, the peace track in Madrid and Oslo and a series of transformations, collapses and global, Arab and Palestinian changes, resulted in the establishment of the PA. Unfortunately, this was followed by the internal Palestinian division of 2007, resulting in the birth of a new face to the Palestinian cause and the creation of a new internal rift, even within the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967. Development in Palestinian political action or renewal of young blood in Palestinian political institutions were also hampered, given the lack of elections. Today, post October 7, 2023 and the subsequent Israeli genocidal war, annihilation and expulsion and displacement from the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Lebanon, have not only put the Palestinian establishment and political representation on the line, but also Palestinian steadfastness and their very existence in jeopardy.

On more than on occasion, the PA has faced problems due to the lack of clarity between the PA, as the pathway to the establishment of a state and a localized reference point for the PLO's national program and the boundaries for powers of both the PA and PLO. In this regard, the authorities of both the PA and the PLO are determined by the 2003 amended Palestinian Basic Law, which begins: "The matter of establishing the PA and its three pillars: legislative, executive and judiciary", considered one of the most important and urgent national tasks and is within the framework of the interim period based on the Declaration of Principles." At the time, it was indicated that the Basic Law and its ratification by the elected PLC was based on the premise that "The PLO is the legitimate and sole representative of the Palestinian Arab people." In spite of these clauses in the Basic Law regarding the status of the PA vis-à-vis the interim period and the national character of the PLO, the relationship between them has remained unclear with the exception of considering the PA and PLO President to be the same.

## **Since Israel's October 2023 genocide**

It has been over a year since Israel's genocidal war began against the Gaza Strip and which has now spread to the West Bank and Lebanon. The roles the PLO and the PA could assume in response to this war seem to be limited and procedural due to several factors including: the constraints they impose on themselves due to agreements with the Israeli occupation, the internal division that has become more of a permanent status quo, not affected by dozens of meetings to achieve reconciliation; institutional calcification and the lack of legislative renewal in PLO and PA institutions through elections and the minimum ceiling of Palestinian representation in all sectors (unions, federations, the National and Central Councils, the Executive Committee, the President's office and the PLC). In light of the aforementioned, the ceiling of political expectations has dropped and interminable waiting (due to changes in the Israeli government or changes in the US administration), are all defining factors. In light of the current situation, the declining roles of the PA, along with any possibility of reviving the PLO and breathing life into its previous roles, constitutes a huge challenge.

## Future vision

The PLO and PA are today faced with certain realities and conditions can be described as follows:

**First condition:** maintaining the status quo: limited, restricted and ineffective roles with no spirit of initiative and with a 'wait and see' tendency that deals with everyday developments without any comprehensive strategic, future perspective.

**Second condition:** Further absence in the status, roles and tasks of the PLO and PA due to the ongoing war on the Gaza Strip, ultimately with outcomes in favor of the occupation. This also means more settlement expansion in a dissected West Bank, more checkpoints, gates and crossings and continued destruction of Palestinian refugee camps, especially in the northern West Bank. In tandem with this is the ban on UNRWA in an attempt to erase the Palestinian refugee identity, continued arrests, assassinations and violations around the clock. This condition will further develop with the incoming US administration that could give the Israeli government the green light to annex the West Bank and impose Israeli law on its entirety, similar to the previous Trump administration's offer to Israel regarding the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem. The last Trump presidency was also significant regarding Arab-Israeli normalization (Abraham Accords), the outcomes of which clearly reflected on the role of signatory Arab countries in addition to Arab countries with previous peace deals with Israel. In this current war, their positions have been either neutrality or complicity.

All of the aforementioned leads to a path in which the PLO, PA and any other Palestinian political body will become defunct in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and every element of Palestinian existence and identity within them challenged, beginning with the PLO and PA.

**Third and final condition:** The PLO and PA initiate or respond to pressure by Palestinian political and social parties and components on the political, social and civil spectrum, to rescue the Palestinian entity, identity, sovereignty, existence and steadfastness on the land of historic Palestine and Palestinian communities abroad. This will be a starting point from which the Palestinians themselves take the lead to create new political facts on the ground rather than responses to the facts on the ground imposed by the occupation. There are many examples in Palestinian history that could be recalled and built on in this context.

Regarding a Palestinian response, in particular in the West Bank, to the genocidal war and ethnic cleansing, it must be noted that this is not only about dismantling the Palestinian political entity. According to Palestinian sociologist, Jamil Hilal, it is about completely annihilating it. This has been an accumulative process for the past two decades following the end of the Aqsa Intifada, particularly since the Palestinian infighting and division that began in the Gaza Strip in 2006-2007. In this regard, Palestinian civil society and its institutions have an enormous task in filling the socio-political void and refocusing the attention of the Palestinian public, primarily through universities and youth organizations, to the danger of the current transformations and clear Palestinian political vacuum. Another civil society task is to pressure decision-makers in the PLO, PA and factions and in political or community-based institutions to push for reform. In this way, the starting point would be based on Palestinian capabilities and potentials in the present, without waiting any longer for changes from the occupation, its allies or the region.

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\* Interviews are in alphabetical order by first name: Dr. Ahmad Azzam (professor of international relations at Qatar University, member of the Palestinian Central Council and former advisor to the Palestinian Prime Minister). Dr. Basem Zubeidi (professor of political science at Birzeit University), D. Hanan Ashrawi (member of the Palestinian negotiating delegation Palestinian government minister, former PLO Executive Committee member), Abdel Jawwad Saleh (PLO Executive Committee member and former Palestinian government minister). D. Ali Jarbawi (Professor of political science and international relations at Birzeit University and former Palestinian government minister), Dr. Ghassan Khatib (Professor of international studies at Birzeit University, member of the Palestinian negotiating delegation and former Palestinian government minister).