

# Democratizing the PLO

## *Prospects and Obstacles*

While the PLO has been recognized both by the international community and by Israel as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, the organization remains undemocratic. Its leadership is not elected. The PLO represents the secular resistance groups of the past, not the political reality of today. In 2011, however, an agreement was reached between the main Palestinian political groups to hold elections for the PLO. It is planned that these elections will include all Palestinians, regardless of their location, in accordance with the principle of fully proportional representation. Recent Arab uprisings for democracy make regional conditions favourable for the holding of such elections. Meanwhile, Western governments fear that the PLO could come to be dominated by Islamists who do not recognize the State of Israel. In the past, such considerations have discouraged the PLO from opening up for democratic reforms. However, the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt has acted as a warning to PLO leaders that sustaining an undemocratic and secular PLO could hit back with a vengeance.

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## The Legitimacy Crisis

The Palestinian National Initiative (PNI) has tried hard to join the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). ‘We don’t understand why there is this insistence on not opening up’, says its leader, the respected Palestinian democracy activist Mustafa Barghouti. ‘They have every opportunity. For instance, we don’t have differences with their political programme. We have applied to be members of the PLO since November 2004, and, up till now, we do not have an answer.’

The experience of the PNI is symptomatic of a crisis within Palestinian politics. The PLO was recognized as ‘the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people’ by the Arab League and the United Nations in 1974, and by Israel and the USA in 1993. When the Palestinian Authority (PA) was established, it was defined as being subordinate to the PLO. Yet, while democratic elections have been held for the PA, its legislative council (PLC) and president, no such elections have ever been held for the parliament of the PLO (the Palestinian National Council, PNC) or for the position of chairman of the PLO. The startling lack of a popular mandate for the PLO leadership was highlighted by the PLC elections in 2006. A group of small parties that together gained 1.5% of the seats on the PLC in the elections controlled a majority of the party seats of the Executive Committee (EC) of the PLO. Meanwhile, the party that had won the elections in the Palestinian territories in 2006 – Hamas – was not a PLO member.

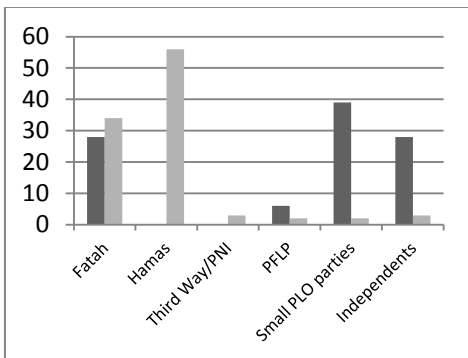


Figure 1: PLO representation (black) versus elected representation for the PLC (grey), percent of seats

This discrepancy between representation within the PLO and representation resulting from the Palestinian elections in 2006 has created a crisis over what legitimate representation

might be in the context of Palestinian politics. The crisis has been further aggravated by the ‘Arab Spring’ and related calls for democratization in the Arab world. The PLO, ‘the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people’, is in acute need of democratic reform.

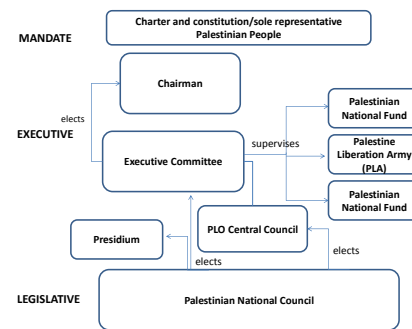


Figure 2. Political structure of the PLO

## The Quota System

Historically, the principle for political representation within the PLO has been that of inclusion. The various Palestinian guerrilla groups needed income to pay their fighters and were therefore vulnerable to external pressure. Two of the guerrilla groups included in the PLO – Saiqa and the Arab Liberation Front – were founded by Syria and Iraq, respectively, to enable those countries to maintain a presence and exert their influence within the PLO. To preserve PLO autonomy, the challenge of the organization was to withstand such interventions by various Arab states. As a result, the principle of majority rule was abandoned in favour of rule by consensus. Majority rule could make it possible for a group that had been outvoted to mobilize both external and internal support and thus threaten the PLO’s claim to be the Palestinians’ sole representative. Consensus rule entailed finding the lowest common denominator, which meant that the smallest Palestinian groups were granted disproportionate influence in the decision-making process. The question of political representation thus became an issue of negotiation between the various factions, where the threat that one might leave the organization could threaten them all. This opened for the cementation of a quota system among the PLO members, where the constituent PLO groups were represented irrespective of their size or popularity among the

Palestinian people at large. Through the quota system, the guerrillas – not representatives of the Palestinian communities in various geographic areas – were given the power of decision-making within Palestinian politics. Moreover, the quota system meant that the leaders of individual factions, responsible for negotiating their quota, were preserved as leaders of their respective factions. Although Fatah was criticized from time to time by other PLO factions for the lack of proportional representation within the PNC, such criticism made little impression, as the guerrillas themselves appeared to be marked by the very ills they were attempting to criticize, having undergone no changes in terms of internal leadership since their founding. ‘It is survival for them,’ said Mahdi Abdel Hadi, director of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA) in Jerusalem. ‘They are happy with the status quo. Look at [PLO General-Secretary] Yasser Abed Rabbo. For 40 years, he has been there.’

## Models for PNC Elections

‘The PNC does not need reforms, we need a new election,’ said PNC speaker Salim al-Zanoun in Amman. Osama Hamdan, a member of the Hamas politburo (the executive organ of Hamas) with responsibility for the organization’s foreign relations in Damascus, concurred: ‘We believe if we took the step to reform the PLO, that means an elected council, an elected leadership, a leadership which can be questioned, so you will have a democratic process inside the Palestinian nation. You will have an elected leader who could be questioned all the time, so you cannot make decisions just because of what Hamas needs or what Fatah needs, but according to what the people need.’

Elections to the PNC are prescribed in the PLO Constitution (Article 5, Chapter II). Since such elections have never been held, the need to elect a new PNC is the main issue in discussions on reforming the PLO. In the May 2011 Cairo Agreement between the main Palestinian factions, it was finally agreed that elections to the PNC would be held. Article 1c of the agreement stated that ‘legislative, presidential, and the Palestine National Council elections will be conducted at the same time exactly one year after the signing of the Palestinian National Reconciliation Agreement’. But, what would elections to the PNC look

like?

Interviews with academics and political leaders from Hamas, Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the PNI in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza suggest that the electoral system adopted for the PNC elections will ostensibly involve direct elections and fully proportional representation, multiple-winner electoral divisions (constituencies) and a closed-lists system. Voters will vote for one party list in each constituency (country), and number of seats allocated to each constituency is proportional to the population of that constituency.

For a PNC composed of 250 representatives (50 additional seats are reserved for the Israeli Palestinians), the approximate geographic proportional allocation of seats would be as presented in Figure 3.

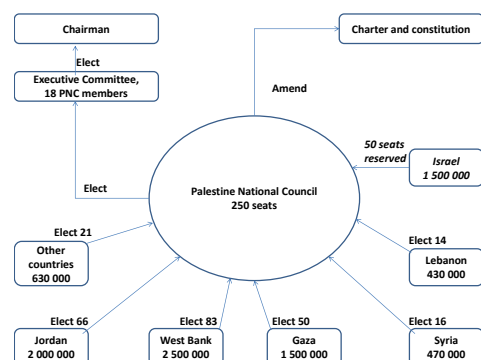


Figure 3. Model of a democratically reformed PLO

Today, owing to the huge pressures for democratization throughout the Arab world and the ongoing reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, conditions are favourable for the actual implementation of PNC elections. On the other hand, time and again the various Palestinian factions have agreed on a path to reform. Why is it that such agreements repeatedly fail to be implemented?

### Obstacles

According to Fatah leader and PLO diplomat Nabil Shaath, the main obstacle to the holding of PNC elections has been the need 'to reach an agreement with Hamas'. However, Shaath also noted that there was fear within Fatah that Hamas might take over the PLO following its victory in the 2006 elections to the PLC: 'There was a lot of hesitance by Abu Mazen and Fatah because they were afraid that the

design of Hamas was to take over the PNC and the PLO, especially since the members of the PNC from inside Palestine was supposed to be the elected members of the PLC, where Hamas now had a majority. Hamas was asking for the same ratio outside, reflecting the Hamas majority in the PLC elections, so probably also that was a factor in delaying an agreement.' Today, there appears to be consensus within Hamas on joining the PLO unconditionally. 'We can not have the PLO implement our opinions before we are in,' commented Yahia Moussa, a PLC member from Hamas in Gaza. 'Hamas is outside the PLO and wants to be inside. This is one of the steps which all of us agree on,' declared the foreign minister of the Hamas government in Gaza, Muhammad Awad. Ali Baraka, the Hamas leader in Lebanon, concurred: 'Since 2005, Hamas has changed. We do not deny this. The demand to have 40% representation was before. We now want to have elections, and we will respect the results of elections.'

What motivation is there, then, within Fatah in relation to a possible change to the status quo within the PLO? Tawfiq Nasser from Fatah in Jerusalem suggests that Fatah must first reform itself: 'You cannot have Fatah leading PLO reforms without first reforming itself. If the party reforms, then the PLO will reform.... But Fatah is not reforming, because everybody is worried that if they open up this box, it will hit them back.'

The resistance towards reform comes from Fatah, alleged Mohsen Saleh of the Al-Zaytouna Centre in Beirut: 'I feel that whenever there is an agreement, you will find that the PLO leadership will only implement the articles regarding the PA in the West Bank and Gaza, but not regarding the PLO. They will postpone this to keep everything under their control. So I feel the main obstacles for reforms are not Hamas but Fatah. If they are genuine, they would at least open the PLO for discussion, whatever percent or proportion, now the PLO is near 100% Fatah.'

However, there are elements within Fatah that are extremely sceptical about opening up the PLO for Hamas. The Palestinian ambassador to Lebanon, Abdullah Abdullah, says he agrees with the decision to hold elections to the PNC, but has doubts about Hamas's intentions: 'In every national movement, there are fifth columns, traitors, call them as you

wish. We have UNITA in Angola, Zulu in South Africa. We believe that Hamas is one strata of the Palestinian people and, irrespective of our evaluation of their programme, some of us – I included – do not believe that they have a national agenda; they want to build if not an Islamic state so an Islamic society. Of course, they quote popular slogans, but theirs is not parallel to our goal.'

In 2006, the Quartet (consisting of the EU, the USA, the UN and Russia) demanded that Hamas renounce violence, recognize Israel and explicitly declare that it respected previous Israeli–PLO agreements as a condition for recognizing a Palestinian unity government. In July 2011, the US State Department issued a statement saying that no country could be expected to negotiate with a 'terrorist organization' sworn to its destruction, referring to the Fatah–Hamas reconciliation agreement. In 2006, Hamas did not give in to the demands of the Quartet. Will its response be different now?

On the issue of respecting previous PLO agreements, Hamas has demonstrated a willingness to compromise. Asked whether Hamas would accept a PLO agreement with Israel if Hamas lost in the PLO elections, Osama Hamdan, from the Hamas politburo, said in Damascus: 'We respect the results of elections, whatever they are. We support the democratic process, regardless of the results. If there were elections and another party won the majority and signed an agreement we opposed, we would oppose that through the democratic process. But we will not destroy all the system just because we oppose this or that.'

On the issue of renouncing violence, Ezzat Al-Rezeq, a member of Hamas's politburo, recently stated that Hamas 'supported peaceful resistance' against the Israeli occupation. This was the first time that a Hamas spokesperson had referred to 'peaceful' – as opposed to 'armed' – resistance. In addition, 'popular resistance' – not 'armed resistance' – was underlined as a principle in the agreement between Hamas leader Khaled Meshal and PA and PLO leader Mahmoud Abbas following their meeting in Cairo on 24 November 2011.

However, when it comes to Hamas unilateral recognizing Israel, there are no indications of a change in the organization's position.

However, it should be noted that Hamas has stated that it would accept the outcome of a Palestinian referendum on this issue. But as long as the USA continues to insist on the recognition of Israel prior to any such referendum, there will be pressure on Fatah from external donors that financial support to the PA is withdrawn if Hamas is co-opted in a united Palestinian political leadership without Hamas changing its political programme. 'Abbas is under American, Israeli and European pressure: no reconciliation, no reform, keep the status quo and negotiations,' said PASSIA director Mahdi Abdel Hadi. PNI leader Mustafa Barghouti concurred: '90% of the obstruction to reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah is from Israel and the United States.'

### Conclusion

The PLO is today on the verge of being democratically reconstituted. Although it might be optimistic to arrange PNC elections already in May 2012, the political distance between Fatah and Hamas has narrowed as internationalization has become Fatah's new political strategy, while Hamas is seeking to express a moderate face in order to be part of the Islamist democratic momentum and not compromise ideological sister parties in the region. That there is indeed a common interest in reactivating a democratic PLO is indicated by the fact that, unlike previous agreements, the 2011 agreement has been followed up with meetings seeking to implement it.

Democratically reconstituting the PLO would mean the abolition of the current quota system for political representation in the organization. Palestinian groups that have failed to make the transformation from armed resistance groups to political parties with support among the general population will lose their positions within the PLO. This is an

inevitable implication of democratization, and it is one that is wanted by the Palestinian people. As Graham Usher, a leading expert on Palestinian politics, notes, there is today 'enormous distrust felt by Palestinians – mainly but not only in the diaspora – toward an unelected, unaccountable West Bank PA–PLO leadership that takes potentially seismic national decisions in their name'. To cure such distrust, proportional representative elections for the PNC will be essential medicine.

As all the main Palestinian factions have agreed on reconstituting the PLO democratically – having elections facilitated by the Arab League, of which the PLO is a full member – it is a paradox that the largest threat to Palestinian democratization today comes from Western countries that do not want to deal with a Palestinian leadership that includes Hamas. The insurmountable demand from the Quartet is that Hamas recognize Israel. However, the fact is that the PLO is one of only three member-states of the Arab League that have recognized the Israeli state, and Hamas is seeking to join the PLO unconditionally – which means that it implicitly accepts the PLO's recognition of Israel.

Rather than working against a democratized PLO within which popular support may make Hamas a main actor, Western governments might work to facilitate free and fair PLO elections. After all, the PLO has been recognized as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Changing their attitudes towards the PLO following elections that might actually make it a legitimate representative would be damaging for these governments' credibility in the Arab world. Moreover, an elected legitimate Palestinian leadership may be regarded as a precondition for any prospective peace agreement. As little as the Palestinians and the international

community may determine Israeli positions, no one but the Palestinians can determine their own. If a legitimate representation of Palestinian political positions is to be possible, it will require a legitimate, elected Palestinian leadership. An elected PLO would increase the likelihood that agreements would be enforced and reduce the spoiling power of rejectionist groups.

### Recommendations

- Encourage the democratic reconstitution of the PLO. Since the PLO is the supreme political authority and representative of the Palestinians, it needs to have a democratic mandate. An elected PLO may be regarded as a precondition for any prospective peace agreement.
- Discontinue micromanaging Palestinian political positions. Western attempts at micromanaging Palestinian political positions jeopardize long-term Palestinian democratic institution-building and the democratization of decision-making processes.
- Palestinian reconciliation should be supported in spite of Hamas's political programme. Reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas is a precondition for democratization of the PLO. If Hamas joins the PLO unconditionally, the PLO will remain the same organization in terms of its political programme but will have a wider democratic mandate.
- Encourage regional states to let Palestinians vote for the PLO without possible repercussions. The Jordanian authorities, in particular, should be approached and encouraged to permit Jordanian Palestinians to vote in PLO elections without fear of having their citizenship revoked. ■

### THE AUTHOR

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### THE PROJECT

This policy brief is derived from a longer PRIO Paper entitled 'Democratizing the PLO'. It forms part of an ongoing PRIO project on 'Rethinking Middle East Peace Talks', which is a continuation of the PRIO project entitled 'Hamas's Concept of a Long-Term Ceasefire'. The project has been funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

### PRIO

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