

# **Junction '67: A Turning Point in the History of the Palestinian National Movement**

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The Six Day War created a new reality in the Middle East, particularly in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Already in the years before the war, there were defined Palestinian organizational frameworks, foremost among them Fatah and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). However, it was the military, territorial, and political outcome of the war and its complex and long term implications for relations between the Arab states and Israel that shaped the conditions for the growth of the Palestinian national movement. The strength of the movement since the Six Day War has fluctuated, seeing highs and lows; nonetheless, it evolved to become firmly established as a key actor in the politics of the Middle East in general and in the relations between Israel and the Palestinians in particular, first under the leadership of the PLO, led by Fatah, and later under the Palestinian Authority (PA).

This essay surveys the primary motifs—by topics and themes, more than chronologically—in the development of the Palestinian national movement during the fifty years since the Six Day War. These motifs are directly and indirectly related to Israel's military achievement in the war and in particular one of its most dramatic outcomes—the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

## Before the War

The political impact of the various Palestinian bodies, organizations, and factions in the Middle East during the two decades between the War of Independence and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 on the one hand, and the war that erupted in 1967 on the other hand, was marginal. These bodies were the embodiments of ideological currents and movements in the region, some of which were Arab-particularist while others were based on universal ideas. The change in the Palestinian political map, which at the time was largely unnoticed, occurred in 1959, with the establishment of Fatah. This was a delayed reaction to the Arab-Israeli wars in 1948 and 1956, in which the Arab armies suffered severe military defeats. The Six Day War strengthened the impression left by these downfalls on the founders of Fatah, who organized secret activity in the name of self-determination and national liberation, as part of a “strategy of entanglement.” This strategy centered on planning a direct confrontation with Israel by means of a series of armed attacks, intended to heighten the tension along the borders and fan the flames of confrontation between Israel and the armies of its neighboring states.

Fatah’s sparse resources meant that its operational plans remained in the theoretical/declarative stage until 1964, when the PLO was established. The PLO, founded by the Arab states as part of their inter-state contest for control of the Palestinian issue no less than as a means of confronting Israel, threatened to undermine Fatah’s efforts to mobilize political-institutional and popular support for itself. Reacting to this challenge, Fatah began to launch terror attacks against Israel across its borders. Although these assaults were few in number and left few marks, they raised the awareness of the organization and its message among the residents of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan and over time became recognized as the first milestones in the process leading to the recognition of Fatah as the leader of the Palestinian national struggle for independence.

Fatah adopted a credo of “independence of decision,” and its activity, as well as that of the other Palestinian factions over the years, for the most part went against the wishes and interests of Arab states. The regional states would have preferred an organization under their control that lacked its own ability to spark military provocations or such that operated according to their explicit policy. Fatah thus operated against all odds, particularly in view of its inferiority in the balance of power vis-à-vis Israel, and it was consistently

in need of logistical assistance and political support, which were provided by states in the Middle East and beyond that sought thereby to promote their own goals. Nonetheless, it was neither the external assistance—which in any case was conditional on avoiding activities that were liable to realize the “strategy of entanglement”—nor the organization’s operational persistence that built Fatah. Rather, Fatah’s historic opportunity to penetrate the regional and international spheres came with Israel’s conquest and occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The organization exploited that opportunity to the fullest.

### **The Day After (1967–1969)**

The results of the Six Day War confirmed the premise underlying the establishment of the PLO, namely that the Arab states were not capable of restoring their sovereignty over the territory of the State of Israel by military means and certainly would not try to do so in the name of the Palestinian people. This inevitable conclusion—following three military defeats (in 1948, 1956, and 1967)—shifted attention from conventional military strength to an alternative mode of activity, namely, an “armed struggle” consisting of terrorist activity. Furthermore, the Fatah leadership saw the West Bank and Gaza under the control of Israel as a “natural” arena for popular guerilla warfare. Although the population in the territories was not overly eager to join the struggle against Israel, the potential of the territories as a platform for the struggle, which would enjoy local grassroots legitimacy, in addition to regional and international legitimacy, remained. This was demonstrated when the popular uprising—what became known as the first intifada—erupted in the West Bank and Gaza some two decades later.

The poor response among the Palestinian population to recruitment efforts, together with the Israeli counter-activity, resulted in the transfer of the Fatah headquarters from the West Bank to Jordan. At that point, Fatah and other Palestinian factions started establishing themselves in the refugee camps of the kingdom and there assumed a “hybrid” nature, i.e., control by a non-state entity of populated territory and involvement in both military and civil activity. Attacks perpetrated against Israel by Fatah across the Jordanian-Israeli border led to a determined Israeli response (Operation Karamah in 1968), yet the very fact that the organization faced the IDF improved its standing in the Palestinian arena. The number of activists who joined Fatah’s ranks grew dramatically, as did the popular support, while at

the same time its core leadership began to take shape. As a direct outcome of this development, Fatah was able to take control of the PLO leadership in 1969, proving that it had become the leading actor among the factions within the Palestinian national movement.

## **The Subsequent Decades (1967–2017)**

### ***The '67 Lines as the Basis for an Agreement***

The Yom Kippur War (1973) brought the Arab-Israeli conflict to a new stage, characterized by an emphasis on its territorial dimension, rather than on the more far-reaching denial of the very existence of the State of Israel. Egypt went to war in 1973 in order to advance a process that would restore its sovereignty over the Sinai Peninsula; Syria sought to restore its control over the Golan Heights; Jordan, for its part, made do with an expeditionary force that fought on the Syrian front. After the war, Egypt and Israel reached a peace agreement, subject to the return of Sinai to Egypt (excluding Gaza). The agreement also granted legitimacy to an Israeli-Jordanian peace agreement that was signed 15 years later. This occurred after a popular uprising began in the West Bank and Gaza, Jordan cut its ties with the West Bank, and direct negotiations began between Israel and the PLO. The dispute between Israel and Syria over the Golan Heights has persisted.

Against this background, a regional and international consensus developed on a territorial aspect of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, and with it, the borders of an eventual agreement. The '67 lines (or “based on them”) were established as the basis for discussion, whether this involved support for political-territorial separation and a two-state solution or full or partial rejection of this option, be it by Israel or the Palestinians.

### ***Upgrade of the PLO Status***

“The armed struggle sows and the political struggle reaps,” according to Hani al-Hassan, advisor to Yasir Arafat and later the interior minister of the PA. In this slogan, al-Hassan captured the efficacy of the Palestinian strategy. For many years the violent struggle, which was at the center of the policy adopted by Palestinian organizations, including the “mainstream” Fatah-led PLO, scored major achievements. It is this strategy that propelled the Palestinian issue to the headlines and consolidated the PLO’s status as the

official Palestinian representative among the Palestinians, throughout the Middle East, and internationally.

When Fatah assumed control of the PLO, the organization was freed of its original status as an agent of the Arab countries. This newly-established independence—however limited due to its need for external support—reinforced the organization's demand to be recognized as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, a goal that was reached in 1974 following the Yom Kippur War. The inability to liberate the territories captured by Israel in 1967 by military means led some of the Arab countries to deal with the challenge posed by Israel politically (and economically). The PLO was assigned a role at the forefront of the struggle, as representing an issue whose resolution is a necessary condition for regional peace. However, as per the positions of the Arab countries regarding the Palestinian struggle since its inception, this recognition did not reflect enthusiasm for the activity of the Fatah-led PLO but rather instrumental considerations. Thus, the members of the Arab League exploited the Palestinian issue as the spearhead of their struggle against Israel while competing with one another. At the same time, their recognition of the PLO as representing the Palestinian issue reflected their distinction between the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even though this distinction never developed into a full break. This development was the culmination of a significant stage in the history of the PLO, which began with the end of the Six Day War. Since then, progress toward an Israeli-Palestinian agreement has remained a necessary prerequisite for upgrading the relations between Israel and the more pragmatic Arab states.

Also in 1974, Yasir Arafat, founder of Fatah and Chairman of the PLO, was invited to speak before the UN General Assembly. This invitation signified a trend in the development of the Palestinian national movement that over the years became known as “internationalization.” Eventually, this term came to describe the PA's orchestrated diplomatic activity against the background of an ongoing deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian political process, which was intended to mobilize international support for a two-state solution.

### ***Geographic Movement and Strategic Diversification***

The enhanced status of the PLO generated a change in the balance between the diverse courses of Fatah's activities. In the late 1980s, cost-benefit considerations led the organization to halt terror activities in the international

arena and focus on violent activity in arenas that were considered legitimate—Gaza Strip and the West Bank, as well as the borders of Israel. At the same time, activities not directly related to the military infrastructure but that nonetheless earned support for the organization by building up grassroots support gained in importance. In Jordan, and at a later stage in Lebanon, the PLO became the actor primarily responsible for education, employment, and social infrastructure among the Palestinians, certainly much more than other Palestinian organizations. This joined Fatah's military strength, which was superior to that of all the other Palestinian factions combined. Belonging to a Palestinian organization, and in particular Fatah, became the norm in these territorial strongholds, whether out of ideology or due to the circumstances of the reality.

Since the mid-1970s, the PLO has invested much in diplomatic activity with the intent of ensuring its relevance in any potential peace process between Israel and the Arab states. The growing emphasis on social activity and in particular the growing importance of political activity was not echoed by organizations that were part of the opposition to Fatah. The terrorism activity perpetrated by these factions, particularly in the international theater, was often meant to torpedo the PLO's efforts to consolidate its position as the legitimate national representative of the Palestinians and to halt its rise in status in Jordan and Lebanon. These opposition factions scored significant accomplishments as their armed assaults, carried out against the backdrop of local antagonism to the increasingly defiant Palestinian presence, generated a chain of response and counter-response that finally led to the expulsion of the PLO and Fatah from their strongholds in Jordan (in 1970) and Lebanon (in 1982).

Jordan expelled the PLO (and the other Palestinian organizations) following an increase in terror attacks launched from its territory that created a direct threat to the regime and at the same time revealed the limit of the PLO's control over the other Palestinian factions. The immediate motive for the expulsion was the landing of hijacked airplanes in Jordan. This dynamic repeated itself in Lebanon, where the Palestinian organizations relocated after their expulsion from Jordan. Based on the Jordanian experience, these groups, led by Fatah, sought to integrate within the highly factionalized Lebanese political framework and to that end allied themselves with local political bodies and militias. This led to fierce opposition to their presence in the country on the part of Syria, Lebanese Christian factions, and Israel.

The Israeli invasion in 1982, which aimed to dismantle the administrative and military infrastructure of the Palestinian organizations in Lebanon, expel their headquarters from the country, and destroy the political legitimacy of the PLO in the regional and international arenas, put an end to their presence in Lebanon as well. In this case, the immediate trigger for the invasion was the attempted assassination of the Israeli ambassador in London by a group belonging to the opposition to Fatah.

The Palestinian attempts to find a replacement for the lost Lebanese stronghold included political coordination with Jordan and even a renewed presence in Lebanon. However, these ventures failed and Fatah again turned to the West Bank. The realization that there was little chance of building a military infrastructure there led the organization to focus on establishing a network of political and social institutions, and its impact on the West Bank population then was greater than that of competing Palestinian factions that were involved in similar endeavors. Nonetheless, at that time it appeared that Fatah's sphere of influence was exhausted and that its development had reached an impasse: Israel and the United States still refused to recognize it and as a result it was left out of the dialogue between Israel and Egypt, even though it included understandings with respect to the Palestinian issue.

This period came to an end in 1987, with the outbreak of the popular uprising in the West Bank and Gaza, which eventually became known as the first intifada. Fatah did not initiate the uprising; on the contrary, in part, it reflected a protest against the PLO for its failure to make progress in ending Israel's control of the territories, no less than the accumulated frustration with the ongoing occupation.

### ***The Political Process Gains Momentum***

Toward the end of the first year of the uprising, when the population in the West Bank and Gaza began to exhibit signs of fatigue, the PLO responded to the challenge with a dramatic declaration that enabled the start of a dialogue with the United States—the renouncement of the armed struggle and recognition of the UN partition plan (Resolution 181, passed in 1947). This declaration, in November 1988, essentially diminished the relevance of its traditional objectives, as listed in the 1974 Ten-Point Program, which called for the establishment of a Palestinian state in any part of Mandatory Palestine to be liberated, alongside the denial of Israel's right to exist.

Even then, the erosion of the PLO's status continued, and the fact that it supported Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War lowered its prestige even further. Against this background, the organization agreed that representatives from the territories would join the Jordanian delegation to the talks with Israel as part of the international initiative under American sponsorship for the restabilization of the Middle East—the multilateral talks that followed the Madrid Conference in 1991).

Concurrently, Israel, which was tired of coping with the uprising, arrived at the conclusion that it was no longer possible to keep the Palestinian issue at the margins of public discourse and agreed to allow a delegation from the territories to participate in the regional talks as part of the Jordanian delegation. As a result, and in order to prevent competition from within the territories, the leadership of Fatah/PLO approved a direct dialogue between its representatives and those of Israel, although at this stage it would only be on an informal basis.

In September 1993, after the talks between Israel and the PLO in Oslo became official and public, the two sides reached agreement between them on the principles of an idea that was essentially amorphous, namely the establishment of mutual trust that would make it possible, within five years, to reach agreement on the issues at the core of the conflict. These included borders, including the future of Israeli settlements in the territories and the future of Jerusalem; the Palestinian refugees and their demand for the right of return; security arrangements; and division of resources. The principles that were agreed upon at Oslo formed the basis for the creation in May 1994 of the PA, which was, to a large extent, an organizational transformation of the PLO, since it was based on the founding generation of Fatah. The Oslo Agreements also included the gradual transfer of territories to Palestinian control.

The Oslo understandings reflected a quantum leap in the history of the Palestinian national movement and the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, starting from this point, which was the peak of the process of legitimization of the Palestinian national movement, the trend began to reverse course. The peace negotiations between the sides were drawn out and did not produce significant tangible results; Israel's settlement activity in the territories continued, practically relentlessly; and Palestinian violence led to a delay in the transfer of territory to control of the PA. For its part,



the PA claimed that it was difficult to stop the violence due to the Israeli military and civilian presence in the territories.

In 2000, the second intifada broke out, following the failed effort by the US administration to skip the interim stages of the negotiations between the sides and reach an agreement that would include Israeli-Palestinian understandings regarding the core issues of the conflict. The Israeli demand that the Palestinian representatives agree to an end to the conflict and an end of claims was rejected. The demand that the Palestinians recognize the State of Israel as the state of the Jewish people was also refused outright.

The rounds of talks between Israel and the PA emphasized the gaps between the two sides, which if not bridged would prevent the formulation of a peace agreement. As a result, public opposition grew among both the Palestinians and the Israelis to concessions on the conceptual, practical, and security levels that would have both an immediate impact and historical significance. One of the expressions of that opposition was the assassination of Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 by an Israeli right wing extremist, who sought to protest a policy that involved giving up territory that is part of the land of Israel.

The Palestinian leadership sensed—not unjustifiably—Israeli reluctance to support territorial concessions. After the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, this fear became focused, and is still focused, on Israeli reluctance to carry out a unilateral redeployment in the West Bank. As a result, the motivation and even ability of the PA to enforce a ceasefire among militant factions seeking to block any possibility of a breakthrough in the political process were significantly reduced. The Israeli policy, for its part, has since then been informed by the (likewise justifiable) fear of committing to an agreement with such a high price to Israel and doubt as to whether the PA will be able or willing to fulfil it, particularly its security aspects.

## **Enter Hamas**

Like “independent decisions,” the other slogan that underlined unity of the ranks was nothing but an aspiration among the PLO leadership. The Palestinian national movement was never united. The Palestinian militant opposition (which was also factionalized) was determined, out of loyalty to its principles, to block any progress in the peace negotiations between Israel and the PA. This is especially true in the case of the Islamic opposition movement Hamas, which was created in the early days of the first intifada on

the basis of the social-conceptual infrastructure of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gaza Strip.

The Oslo Accords, which specified the respective commitments of Israel and the PA, essentially defined for the internal Palestinian opposition the domains in which their activity could derail the peace process and immobilize the PA. Hamas therefore began to carry out terror attacks that provoked a massive military response from Israel and thus in effect co-opted it into its campaign against the peace process and against the PA.

The failure of the mainstream Palestinian movement, i.e., the PLO and the PA, to realize the potential inherent in the Oslo Accords weakened its influence. At the same time, the status of Hamas, which sought an “Islamic” solution to the Palestinian plight, strengthened. Following the military takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007 by Hamas forces and the expulsion of Fatah personnel from the area, the ideological-strategic gap between the two Palestinian camps expanded into an internecine conflict and a blatant political rift. These developments, which occurred following the Israeli military response to the second intifada, enhanced the weakening of the PA, both on the sociopolitical level and with respect to security. Moreover, the unilateral withdrawal by Israel from Gaza (including the evacuation of settlements) had removed the barriers to the military buildup of Hamas in the region. Furthermore, Hamas won the general elections in the territories in 2006, which were held by the PA in an attempt to restore its public legitimacy.

Since the Hamas takeover of the Strip, the Palestinian political arena has been divided between two different authorities with a clear geographic division: the PA, which controls the West Bank, and Hamas, which controls Gaza. Accordingly, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has split into three distinct spheres of dispute: between Israel and the PA, between Israel and Hamas, and between the PA and Hamas.

The Palestinian national movement, and in particular the camp that seeks an agreement with Israel, faces a complex challenge. The internal Palestinian rivalry plays a decisive role in the dynamic of the conflict. Thus, the three rounds of fighting between Israel and Hamas (in 2009, 2012, and 2014), which resulted in a large number of casualties, most of them Palestinian, have left the civilian infrastructures in Gaza in ruins and have demonstrated the potential of violent escalation. At the same time, they have clearly showed the limited control of the PA in the Palestinian domain.

Peace initiatives introduced by Israeli, Palestinian, or international leading figures and institutions have focused on a process that will facilitate a discussion on the core issues or on the principles and content of an agreement. Most of them have minimized the weight of an evident structural characteristic of the Palestinian national movement, i.e., the division in its ranks. Other initiatives have been based on the belief that momentum and progress in the peace process will help stabilize the Palestinian arena. However, efforts to generate a breakthrough in the peace process have failed, in part as a result of the internal Palestinian tension and infighting, which has always included the competition for prestige in the violent struggle against Israel. Moreover, the test of loyalty to the “Palestinian cause” has been the insistence on maximalist demands and objectives. Still, it is highly likely that the lack of progress toward the disengagement between Israel and the Palestinians and the continued Israeli control of the territories cultivates these phenomena further.

From Israel’s perspective, both among the public and among decision makers, the intra-Palestinian rivalry, and in particular the ongoing armed struggle, provided legitimacy and opportunities to defer a concrete discussion of the possibilities for a peace agreement. At the same time, the rifts in the Palestinian arena led to a deferral of the discussion in Israel of the social, security, and demographic implications of the political-territorial reality in the sphere of conflict over time.

## **Fifty Years Later**

Fifty years after the Six Day War, the Israeli-Palestinian political process is locked in an extended period of stagnation. Neither the political conditions in the Palestinian arena nor those in Israel encourage any progress toward a dialogue on a settlement, even though there is a clear convergence of interests between Israel and the PA, most of all with respect to security, and in particular with respect to the struggle against Hamas.

Since the PA cannot abandon the two-state idea, which is the political and legal foundation for its existence (Israel cannot abandon its obligations to it either), it has turned to the international theater in an effort to advance Palestinian independence on a path that avoids direct dialogue with Israel. At the same time, an achievement in the international arena could help the PA restore its position at home, in view of the domestic criticism it has received for poor governance, as well as its failures over many years to

reach the ultimate goal of independent statehood. The PA's international efforts have yielded some significant accomplishments, even if they were primarily symbolic, since they have not as yet brought about a situation that will force Israel to relax its positions and/or withdraw from the territories. However, the name of the game is still "two states for two peoples," and in contrast to the political reality prevailing in 1948, the Palestinian issue is currently represented by a national authority. Despite its many weaknesses and its limited control of the territories in dispute with Israel, the PA has fostered a broad regional and international consensus regarding its political and territorial demands.

Alongside the declared commitment to the two-state vision, both sides are contemplating steps, whether temporary or permanent, reflecting the existing reality of non-separation, the inability to return to the negotiating table, and the doubt as to the possibility of implementing an agreement if and when it is reached. In Israel, proposals to improve management of the conflict have been considered, until conditions are ripe for the renewal of negotiations or even thereafter. In this context, proposals have been sounded for independent measures that will lighten the military and political-diplomatic burden of control of the West Bank. Alternatively, there have been proposals for the annexation, at least partial, of territory. On the Palestinian side, alongside the opposition to the two-state idea that is led by Hamas, there is renewed thinking among the mainstream polity in the direction of one state in the whole of the territory of Mandatory Palestine. This echoes the PLO's original strategic objective, in place until its declared recognition of the UN partition plan.

The current political-territorial situation, in particular as background to the annexation of territory to Israel that is proposed by some, and alternatively to a Palestinian abandonment of the two-state solution, may be a sign of historic regression, whose endpoint is the blurring of the 1967 lines and a renewed discourse on the boundaries of the conflict arena, as they were until the end of the 1948 war. This possibility constitutes a major challenge to Israel and its commitment to the vision that led to its creation—a Jewish and democratic state.