



Abu Mazen, Ramallah, May 2020. Photo: Alaa Badarneh/Pool via Reutersa

# The Palestinian National Movement: Toward Recalculating its Route

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The Palestinian arena has suffered serious upheaval in recent years. The leadership in Ramallah has lost much of its legitimacy, and Hamas is not accepted by the public as a preferred alternative to the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. The path of political negotiations under Abu Mazen has failed, and the path of armed resistance led by Hamas caused much destruction and division within the Palestinian people. The PA has been declared a failure, with its leadership seen as holding onto power at all costs. Hamas, which is aware of its limitations as an alternative, demands to be part of any future leadership. The result is an unprecedented crisis that places the Palestinian national movement in a state of ideological and organizational confusion. This article analyzes the current internal Palestinian reality and explains what led the Palestinian national movement to this nadir and what has changed in its approach to the conflict. What Palestinian leadership stands to emerge next? And are we approaching the end of the agreement-oriented era that has existed since the Oslo Accords?

**Keywords:** Palestinians, Hamas, PLO, Palestinian Authority, Israel, Gaza Strip, political process, United States, differentiation, split

## Introduction

The last armed conflict between Israel and Hamas—Operation Guardian of the Walls, in May 2021—clearly and openly exposed the serious deterioration in the standing of the Palestinian Authority, the PLO, and the Fatah movement that leads them. [Neither their existence nor their positions](#) reflect the will of the Palestinian people any longer. If before the conflict it appeared that the Palestinian national camp was losing its legitimacy, after the conflict it became clear that its legitimacy has plunged into the abyss. It is as if a veil has been lifted from the Palestinian Authority, which leads this camp, exposing to all its dissolution and its emptiness. For example, in a [poll](#) by Khalil Shikaki published in September 2021, 80 percent of respondents were in favor of Abu Mazen's resignation. The PA is tagged with a failed political path, corruption, and lack of capability and vision to advance ideas that will extract it from its current situation. This is an unprecedented crisis because of the predicament that has engulfed the Palestinian people following the [declaration of independence](#) in 1988, which was a result of the first intifada. This declaration was in practice the basis for the policy that has shaped the path of the PLO and the Palestinian national camp until now, and over time, other currents that oppose this declaration.

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This is a multilayered crisis, encompassing issues of leadership, ideology, and organization, and accompanies the serious concern about the decline of the urgency of the Palestinian issue and its near disappearance from the regional and international agenda. On the other side is the competing Islamic camp, which does not cease to challenge the Palestinian Authority and the entire national camp. It opposes the political process that began with the signing

of the Oslo Accords and frequently claims that the security coordination has obliterated all the Palestinians' bargaining chips. However, it has not succeeded so far in being accepted as a preferred alternative to the national stream and to the national idea.

This article characterizes what distinguishes the crisis, examining the role of each of the actors in the emergence of this crisis and the difficult dilemma that it poses to the Palestinians. It describes three milestones in the development of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 1967, which led to changes in the Palestinian national movement's approach toward Israel and the conflict with it, and which in effect created the conditions for the development of the current internal Palestinian reality. Finally, it suggests possible directions in which the Palestinian arena could proceed.

## The Milestones

The Six Day War in 1967 effected [a significant change](#) in the conduct and performance of the Palestinian national movement. The defeat of the Arabs greatly strengthened the national identity of the Palestinians, led them to the conclusion that they could not rely on Arab armies to liberate Palestine, and created an opportunity to break free from the suffocating official patronage of these countries. [The sense of alienation, discrimination, and neglect](#) that many Palestinians felt toward the Arab countries increased the desire for independence. In February 1969 this independence became official, Yasir Arafat was elected by the Palestinian National Council as Chairman of the PLO, and in 1974, the Arab summit recognized the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people.

Three milestones shaped the path of the Palestinian national movement since it began to operate independently, without the restrictive patronage of the Arab countries. The first was the removal of the Palestinian presence from Jordan in 1970—the Fatah movement with all its units and leftist Palestinian organizations. This event is known in Palestinian historiography

as Black September, because of the serious blow dealt to them by King Hussein of Jordan. The King sought to put an end to the terrorist activities that the Palestinians launched from Jordan against Israel and Israeli targets around the world, including the hijacking of passenger airplanes to Amman, where one was even blown up at the airport. These actions seriously undermined the stability of the kingdom and forced the king to put an end to the presence of the Palestinian organizations in Jordan's territory. From there they moved to Lebanon, but the expulsion from Jordan, despite the aura of heroism that these "bold" acts of terrorism against Israel and the hijacking of airplanes granted them, taught the Palestinians that there was a limit to their freedom of operation in their activity against Israel from within the territory of the Arab countries.

The second milestone was the expulsion of the PLO and all its factions and its military and organizational force in the First Lebanon War in 1982. Lebanon, which could not prevent the Palestinians from penetrating its territory, paid a heavy price. The Palestinians took over the refugee camps, launched actions against Israel, and operated in Lebanon as if they were on their own turf. The expulsion of August 1982 involved a serious Palestinian crisis, because subsequently there was no Arab country that was willing to host the PLO, and its units and headquarters were scattered throughout the Middle East. This course of events also reflected the anger in many Arab countries at the PLO's conduct in Lebanon. The result was dispersal and division, the absence of concentrated power, and an inability to exert force. The PLO, whose headquarters were relocated to Tunisia, was left isolated, suffered from desertions, had difficulty convening its institutions, and lost much of its glamor as a liberation organization. The focus of activity moved to the territories under Israel's control, the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The third milestone, the main catalyst for the changes in the PLO's stance toward the conflict,

was the first intifada, which began in December 1987. [The idea](#), which aroused a strong response following a traffic accident in which an Israeli truck driver struck and killed four Palestinians, was to encourage the masses to take to the streets to demonstrate their rejection of the ongoing "occupation," and enlist international public opinion in support of the crowds and their desire for independence. The demonstrators repeatedly emphasized three messages: "We do not want a state instead of Israel but rather a state alongside Israel"; "we are a nation" and Israel must not deny this; and "we do not want" to be part of Israel (Friedman, 1989). These messages received considerable attention in the media, the international community, and Israeli peace organizations, which began an extensive dialogue with the leaders of the intifada.

The PLO, which was outside of the picture during the first few months, watched the events with dismay and [feared](#) losing its standing in favor of the internal leadership, but went on board once it was made clear there was no intention to bypass it. Thus the PLO leadership gained new life, and the population in the territories in effect restored it to the political and international arena. This was also the basis for the Palestinian declaration of independence in Algiers in November 1988, in which the PLO accepted [the UN partition plan](#) in Resolution 181 and the principle of two states for two peoples, and later, accepted the 1967 lines as the borders of the Palestinian state. This course of events changed the face of the conflict and turned it from an existential conflict into a conflict over borders. Without this declaration, it is doubtful it would have been possible to sign the Oslo Accords. Within the Palestinian arena, the course of events created a deep crisis, due to the considerable resistance that it aroused among Islamic elements and opponents of a settlement with Israel. This is in effect the beginning of the intra-Palestinian split between Hamas and Fatah, which continues to this day. Over the years Hamas has also [internalized the significance](#) of this declaration and adapted

its platform to the almost irreversible reality that it created. Inter alia, in May 2017 the movement published a new political platform that asserted that it agrees to the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders if that is the Palestinian consensus, but will not recognize Israel and will not engage in peace negotiations with it.

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The split is essentially the regime that has governed the relations within the Palestinian arena. The official seal of approval that it received in the 2006 elections turned it over the years from an ideological gap that reflects a different worldview regarding Israel and the conflict to a chasm that penetrates many areas of life and crosses families, sectors, and issues, which complicates taking decisions with a broad consensus. These identity politics create two camps that make it very difficult to forge a connection between them.

### **The Uniqueness of the Current Crisis**

The current crisis is unprecedented compared with the many crises that the Palestinian national movement has known in the past. After years of friction among its elements and between each in its own way with the State of Israel, the Palestinian movement has reached a point in which it is held accountable. The reason: in practice the path of the Palestinian national movement has failed and has ceased being a home to every Palestinian. Hamas, in contrast, is valued by the public for the initiative that it displays and the friction that it creates intermittently with Israel, unlike the Palestinian Authority—the clear representative of the national stream that generally prevents this kind of friction.

When he was elected in 2005, Abu Mazen received a great deal of license for action, including military and civilian coordination, but on condition of there being a political process. The Oslo Accords failed a long time ago and there is no point in continuing to adhere to them—this claim is sounded repeatedly by Hamas and many others, and does not receive an adequate response from the Palestinian Authority.

Intra-Palestinian reconciliation, which for a short time late in the Trump era seemed to have some chance, also dissolved very quickly. With Biden's victory in the November 2020 elections, Abu Mazen stopped the rapprochement process between the two factions, and in effect was seen as the party refusing to reconcile.

### **Hamas's Role in the Crisis**

Hamas presents itself as authentic Palestinian. Its combination of religiosity and nationalism strengthens the identity of each element and expands the common denominators for Palestinian unity. After the failure of the many reconciliation attempts, and once it became clear that Abu Mazen is the main barrier to reconciliation, the authenticity that Hamas offers has a major advantage. The Muslim Brotherhood movement that Hamas is part of has been rejected in every Arab country and even in Egypt, where it won the elections in 2012, but was deposed a year later. In the Palestinian case, however, Hamas not only provides authenticity but also demonstrates action in practice, proving that even Israel is forced to take it into consideration, and fulfills the desire for revenge that Israel has in effect instilled among Palestinians.

Nonetheless, Hamas has inherent weaknesses. It is aware of the limitations of its leeway as an Islamic movement that wants [to interface](#) with the international community. It is aware of the great difficulty of penetrating the heart of the majority of the Palestinian public, which is not willing to accept Islamic rule, and its performance in the Gaza Strip since the



takeover in 2007 does not display a solid ability to resolve Gaza's problems. On the contrary, the destruction that Gaza has suffered has increased after each round of conflict with Israel and left its residents exhausted, scarred, and embittered. Therefore, Hamas is not in a hurry, and it makes clear, at least on the rhetorical level, that it does not wish to seize power from the PLO, but rather to be a partner to it.

## The Leadership Crisis

The drive for the PLO's independence involved a struggle against the Arab countries. Achieving recognition as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people was extremely important to the formation of the national movement. Until Hamas's appearance, no one imagined that an organization would be established from within the Palestinian home that would so effectively undermine the PLO's exclusivity as the representative of the Palestinian people.

The two leaders who led the PLO since 1969 insisted on the importance of maintaining exclusive representation as the jewel in the Palestinian crown. Each body or organization that wished to influence had to enter under the umbrella of the PLO and take on all the commitments the PLO had assumed. There were also those who even [criticized the PLO](#) for insisting during the signing of the Oslo Accords on demanding recognition as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, instead of demanding the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people.

But this is not sufficient for explaining the leadership crisis. Arafat was destructive on the path toward national aspirations due to his lack of credibility and his interest in maintaining a military option, despite the agreements that he signed, and thereby caused a crisis of confidence with the Israeli side. In contrast, his successor, Abu Mazen, who is more credible and more committed to the agreements, undermined the national aspirations through his indecision. He did not exhibit confidence and did not

stand in front of the Palestinian and Israeli publics in order to explain at the right time why an agreement was not reached, or what else was necessary in order for the political process underway between 2007 and 2009, the Annapolis process, to succeed. In effect, Abu Mazen seriously harmed what was defined as the Israeli peace camp and contributed to the ongoing disconnect between the Palestinian Authority and the right wing governments that have arisen since then in Israel.

## Israel's Role in the Crisis

The lack of connection between Israel and the Palestinians does not stem only from Abu Mazen's conduct at the end of the political negotiations; it is also the result of Israel's lack of interest since 2009 in entering a political process with the Palestinians.<sup>1</sup> When it entered such processes, for example with Secretary of State John Kerry's initiative, it was [constrained](#) to do so. The composition of governing coalitions in Israel have since then been based to a large extent on the principle of "maintaining the Land of Israel"—a principle coined by the religious right wing parties, vital members of these governments, and which became their [criterion](#) for supporting a candidate for prime minister. Conversely, a political process and dialogue with the Palestinians implies [a threat to them](#). The challenge posed by Abu Mazen—who on the one hand makes sure to maintain effective security coordination that is valued by the Israeli security forces, but on the other hand pursues a struggle against the State of Israel in the international and legal arena—is not easy. Israel, which needs to defend its image in this arena, finds it difficult in the absence of a political process to grapple with the criticism aroused by this struggle and to explain its policy. The result is an ongoing disconnect. For over 12 years, no Israeli Prime Minister has met with the Chairman of the Palestinian Authority, and some circles in Israel are angry with Abu Mazen, hope for his removal, and demonize the Palestinians.

The internal discourse in Israel, which the Palestinians follow on a daily basis, has also changed significantly. If in the past it was characterized by the obligation to strive for a political process, today it is marked by indifference and distrust toward the Palestinians. For Abu Mazen, who adheres to the security coordination and even strengthened it following the failure of the negotiations in 2009, this discourse is another catalyst in the process of his loss of relevance in the eyes of the Palestinian public. When American administrations have difficulty influencing the discourse in Israel, Abu Mazen and his rule are deemed increasingly irrelevant.

### The Effect of the Trump Administration

The Trump administration dealt the most severe blow to Abu Mazen and the Palestinian Authority. Over the years, the US administrations were seen by the Palestinians as siding with Israel, but credible in terms of fairness during negotiations. When the Palestinians declared their independence in 1988 and opened the door for dialogue, they relied in part on recognizing the importance of the international community headed by the United States. The Trump administration began its talks with Israel and with the Palestinians in early 2017, [presuming to be able to succeed](#) where many others had failed. Already in the initial talks it became clear to the Palestinians that this was not an administration that maintained the rules of balance like its predecessors, but rather one that was trying to impose a settlement on them that soon became clear they were [unable to accept](#). The first claim voiced by the Palestinians after the talks began to formulate what was eventually called “the deal of the century” was that the administration had in effect adopted the position of the Israeli right and was not acting as a mediator, but as someone helping one side at the expense of the other. These talks were accompanied by great tension. The Palestinian rejection outraged Trump and his

staff, and in response he took a series of punitive steps such as freezing the funds transferred as aid to the Palestinian Authority, ending the aid to UNRWA, closing the PLO offices in Washington, and passing legislation permitting American citizens harmed in terrorist actions to sue any international entity receiving aid from the United States, which greatly harmed the Palestinians and their international image. This policy contravened that of the previous US administrations. When the deal of the century was published, it became clear to the Palestinians that in practice it did not discuss a state but rather an autonomous entity, whose territory would still be under Israeli control, due to the security responsibility Israel would retain throughout the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea and due to the nature of the proposed entity, which would comprise closed enclaves connected by narrow strips in order to allow territorial contiguity.

It is not at all clear how Trump’s experts and advisors imagined they would be able to receive Palestinian agreement to a plan that was so draconian from their perspective, and it may be that there was an intention from the start to present a proposal they couldn’t accept, in order to put them back on the defensive. In any case, the deal did not receive the official support of any Arab country. As an alternative and perhaps as punishment of the Palestinians, the Americans advanced the normalization agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, and thereafter with Morocco and Sudan. These agreements created a new regional reality, which upgraded Israel’s regional standing and opened up broad channels of commercial and international activity to Israel.

The Palestinians, who were left isolated and outcast, came to the conclusion that there was a need to unite the ranks. For a time it seemed that the possibility of reconciliation was viable, but [the winds changed](#) immediately after Trump’s defeat in the November 2020 presidential elections. The great hopes that

the international community would ultimately impose a solution on Israel faded away. Abu Mazen received the brunt of the domestic criticism, the claims against him intensified, and he was accused of pursuing a conciliatory and non-violent policy, which granted Israel safe room for quiet and left the Palestinians without bargaining chips. The result is that Abu Mazen is still the Chairman of the PLO, the Chairman of the Palestinian Authority, and the Chairman of Fatah, but in practice the PLO is no longer “the sole representative of the Palestinian people,” the Palestinian Authority is subject to serious internal criticism and losing legitimacy, and the Fatah movement is divided into more than three groups, two of which insistently demand Abu Mazen’s dismissal.

## The Palestinians on the Horns of a Dilemma

This reality poses a difficult dilemma for the Palestinians regarding the PLO’s right to exist, an organization that for years has not succeeded in implementing the strategy it accepted in 1988 that since then has been the basis for its foreign policy. On the one hand, what is the relevance of the Fatah movement that leads the organization, and why should it continue to adhere to the Oslo Accords even when it is clear to all that they have failed and do not fulfill the objectives for which they were signed? On the other hand is the question of giving up on the achievements reaped since Oslo: the establishment of a national entity, institutions, and a stable fabric of life that provides employment for many and ensures income. Is it right to abandon all of these when the Palestinian issue is losing its standing as the problem of the Arab world, when the Israeli, Arab, and international disregard is apparent to all? And above all, the question hovering in Ramallah is whether such a course of action doesn’t open the door for transferring control of the West Bank to Hamas.

Abu Mazen still enjoys the standing of elected president, despite the criticism of him and the

fact that more than 17 years have passed since his election; in addition, there are no elected presidents in Arab countries who can accuse him of illegitimacy. Likewise, Hamas has not been put to the test of elections since 2006, and in the public arena, the intensity of the calls for Abu Mazen’s resignation do not compare to what emerged at the height of the Arab Spring toward presidents such as Mubarak and Ben Ali.

Few cards remain in Palestinian hands, as long as Abu Mazen is alive and continues to represent his people. They include [threats](#) that could well challenge Israel, such as canceling the recognition of the State of Israel; canceling the agreement to a Palestinian state with the 1967 borders; demanding a return to the partition plan in Resolution 181; and canceling the Oslo Accords. There are also [threats](#) to demand a single egalitarian state between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. National reconciliation likewise comes up occasionally as a threat, with the understanding that just raising it increases the concern in Israel. The problem is, Abu Mazen’s threats have lost their weight because he has threatened often and not carried out his threats.

The more complex challenge will confront Israel on the day after Abu Mazen. He shows no sign of resigning voluntarily and vacating his seat in an orderly manner in favor of an agreed-upon figure acceptable to everyone. Fatah, his movement, which sees itself as a governing party, will insist on maintaining this stronghold. His death could unify it because many see him as the reason for its divisions, but the lack of an agreed mechanism for electing the successor, as was the case the day after Arafat, could develop into power struggles between several figures who see themselves as worthy of succeeding him.

Recently, Abu Mazen appointed the minister responsible for relations with Israel, Hussein al-Sheikh, secretary general of the Executive Committee of the PLO, in place of the late Saeb Erekat. This appointment places al-Sheikh at a more convenient starting point than others

for the presidency, but it has provoked much anger, increased the criticism of Abu Mazen, and could increase the struggles within the movement and weaken it. There are many question marks surrounding the personality of al-Sheikh regarding his skills, his integrity, and his moral standards, which raise doubts regarding his chances of succeeding Abu Mazen. The change of leadership on the day after Abu Mazen will require a reexamination of the entire issue of security coordination, because Abu Mazen attained the legitimate authority in this field after the stamp of approval the public gave him in the 2005 elections. Anyone who comes after him will have difficulty defending the security coordination based on the claim that it is sacred.

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On the other side is Hamas, which is in a different position than that of the day after Arafat. It is demanding its place in government and claiming that the PLO and the Palestinian Authority without Hamas are no longer the exclusive representatives of the Palestinian people. Hamas represents many of the residents of Gaza and the West Bank who see themselves as an inseparable part of the Palestinian people, and so its leaders demand to be represented in all PLO institutions and in every decision making forum. From Hamas's perspective, this is a new era that demands reshuffling the cards. Abu Mazen's successors in the Fatah movement, even if they adopt a stricter policy toward Israel, will want to maintain the stability of the Palestinian arena, but will not be able to ignore these demands. They will expect Israeli understanding of dialogue or rapprochement if it develops with Hamas, but will have difficulty demanding the disarmament of Hamas as Abu Mazen demanded when he hinged reconciliation on this condition.

Assuming that Palestinian public pressure for national unity will increase on the day after Abu Mazen and will bring about a unification of the ranks within Fatah and rapprochement with Hamas, or even in a situation in which the two sides do not succeed in moving closer and Fatah remains alone, it is very doubtful that it would be able to continue in the same format as under Abu Mazen. First, legitimacy to continue the security coordination is in constant decline. His successors will demand changing it or reducing its scope, preventing IDF forces from entering Area A, reducing its activity in Area B, and other demands that aim to avoid the image of being an Israeli mercenary. Second is the question of negotiations and a negotiated solution, which long ago reached a dead end, in the opinion of most Palestinians, due to the inherent asymmetry in the relationship with Israel. The intention is, unlike Abu Mazen's approach, to stand united under one Palestinian umbrella and demand changing the rules of the game. Third is the question of the differentiation between the West Bank and Gaza, particularly as the call to cancel it and connect the West Bank with Gaza has become a national consensus. With the departure of Abu Mazen, one of the barriers to this will also be removed.

It is very doubtful that Israel will be able to ignore the expected changes in the Palestinian arena and the conflict after the Abu Mazen era. Israel will need to reorganize ideologically, conceptually, and operationally vis-à-vis a changing Palestinian arena.

## Conclusion

The Palestinian arena is confronting the most serious crisis in its history, whose main expression is its failure and the loss of direction—the failure of the armed struggle, which has thus far not succeeded despite the various forms that it has taken over the years, and the failure of the political path, which since 1988 has guided the Palestinian national movement and has been also been adopted in part by its opponents, in understanding that this in effect



is the Palestinian consensus. The question of where to go from here, which confronts all the Palestinians, is compounded by concern that their problem is removed from the international and regional agenda. Consequently, on the day after Abu Mazen, Israel could face many urgent challenges, such as a changing Palestinian arena that demands more from Israel; a different format of security coordination; an end to the differentiation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank; and perhaps an end to the quest for negotiations and a political settlement based on the asymmetry that has existed so far.

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## References

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## Notes

- 1 Prime Minister Netanyahu's Bar-Ilan speech in 2009, in which he accepted the principle of two states if the Palestinians agree to the conditions that he placed, was presented a few months later by his father, Prof. Benzion Netanyahu, [as a tactical move](#) that aimed in advance at Palestinian rejection.