

Terms

Fatah

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Definition

The Fatah movement (*Harakat al-Tahrir al-Watani al-Filastini*, Palestinian National Liberation Organization), is a Palestinian national movement that since the 1970's has been the dominant faction in the PLO, the Sole Legitimate Representative of the Palestinian People.

From its establishment in 1995 until the recent elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) (1/06) in which it lost its majority and the right to form the government, the Fatah movement was the most dominant political party in the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Historical Background

The Fatah movement was established in Kuwait (1959) by a group of Palestinian refugees headed by Yasser Arafat, in light of the growing disappointment with the traditional Palestinian leadership and the Arab states' lack of promotion of the Palestinian problem. The movement developed and was identified with the Doctrine of the Armed Struggle (see below).

The establishment of the PLO under the initiative of Egypt and the Arab states was regarded as a challenge by Fatah. The PLO claimed to represent the Palestinian people in its entirety and to be an umbrella organization of the various Palestinian organizations, despite the fact it was primarily under Egypt's patronage. As a reaction to the establishment of the PLO, Fatah carried out its first military action against Israeli targets (1/65).¹

Following the Arab state's military defeat in the 1967 War, the PLO's dependence on Egypt and the Arab states reduced considerably and the popularity of the organization among Palestinians became evident. In 1968, Fatah took control of the PLO, and Arafat was elected Chairman of the PLO's Executive Committee (2/69).² Consequently, Fatah became the most dominant element in the Palestinian National Movement.

At the Rabat Summit (10/74) the PLO was recognized by the Arab states as the Sole Legitimate Representative of the Palestinian People. A month later, when Arafat was invited to address the UN General Assembly (11/74), the UN also recognized the status of the PLO and bestowed upon it observer status at the General Assembly. These developments strengthened Fatah's prestige and power. Israel recognized the PLO as the Sole Legitimate Representative of the Palestinian People in the Declaration of Principles (9/93) a central tenet of the Oslo Accords.

Following the establishment of the PA, part of Fatah's leadership returned from the Diaspora to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Fatah became the dominant party in the PA due to its majority in the PLC and the government. Following Hamas' electoral victory, Fatah lost its dominance in the PA.

Ideology

¹ On January 1 1965, Fatah unsuccessfully tried to strike against the Israeli National Aqueduct. The day when the mission was carried out is regarded as the founding date of the organization.

² Anat N. Kurz, **Fatah and the Politics of Violence: The Institutionalization of a Popular Struggle**, (Tel Aviv: Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies, 2005), p. 57.

Since Fatah gained control of the PLO, its principles and philosophy became identified with those of the PLO and the Palestinian National Movement.

Fatah developed the Doctrine of the Armed Struggle (see also Ethos of Struggle), which was incorporated into the Palestinian National Charter of the PLO (amended in 1968). According to the Charter, Mandatory Palestine in its entirety is to be liberated and the State of Israel is to be wiped out; no recognition of Israel nor the Jewish right to self-determination in mandatory Palestine is acceptable; the armed struggle is the only strategy to liberate Palestine.

The "Phased Plan" (6/74) of the PLO maintained that the organization would govern all parts of Palestine that would become liberated, with the aim of continuing the armed struggle against Israel. Some interpreted this statement as proof that the organization was willing to consider territorial compromise because it realized that destroying Israel was unfeasible.

In the declaration of Palestinian independence (Algiers, 11/88), which was based on UN General Assembly Resolution 181 and mentioned resolution 242 (see UN Resolutions 242 and 338) the organization accepted the principle of the two-state-solution.

The PLO recognized Israel's right to exist and renounced the use of terrorism in the Declaration of Principles (9/93). As the dominant body in the PLO, Fatah personnel were the ones to carry out all the relations with Israel that were to take place in the framework of the Oslo Process.

The Institutions of the Movement

- **Central Committee** – the executive branch of Fatah. It is practically the highest decision-making body, though in principle it is subordinate to the General Committee.
- **General Committee** – the "parliament" of Fatah and allegedly the highest authority of the movement. The committee is supposed to appoint the members of all the other official institutions. It is composed of approximately 300-500 members, although over a thousand members participated in its last summit ('89).
- **Revolutionary Council** – the movement's intermediate body, a kind of reduced parliament or extended executive branch, placed under the General Committee and above the Central Committee; it is composed of about 75 members that were either elected by the General Committee or appointed by Arafat and his confidants.³

Since Arafat's death, the secretary-general of Fatah is no longer the Chairman of the PLO and the PA. Farouk Kadoumi (one of the founders of the movement, and the head of the political department of the PLO) was appointed secretary-general of Fatah following Arafat's death. On the other hand, Abu Mazen, who serves as Chairman of the PLO and PA, has been recently appointed the "supreme commander" of the movement, a position that was previously held by Arafat.⁴ It is uncertain whether the "supreme commander" or the Secretary General enjoys greater powers and authority.

Fatah's Internal Struggles and Divisions

Since the beginning of the Palestinian Intifada (10/00) the power-struggles inside the Fatah movement have sharpened. There are two main power-struggles: (1) between the "Old Guard" led

³ Guy Bechor, **Lexicon of the PLO**, (Tel Aviv: the Ministry of Defense, 1991), p. 281 (in Hebrew).

⁴ On Kadoumi's appointment as secretary-general see: Hess, **Haaretz**, 11/11/04 (in Hebrew). Abu Mazen was appointed Chairman of the PLO's Executive Committee immediately following Arafat's death (11/04) and Chairman of the PA during the special elections that were held in the Palestinian territories (1/9/05). Regarding Abu Mazen's appointment to "supreme commander" see Issacharoff, **Haaretz**, 11/13/06 (in Hebrew).

by Abu Mazen and Ahmad Quraei, and the "Young Guard" led by Marwan Barghout;⁵ (2) between the "external" leadership of Fatah, which Kadoumi leads, and the "inside" leadership led by Abu Mazen.⁶

Due to these power-struggles, as well as growing corruption allegations against Fatah's members, the movement found great difficulties formulating a unified list of candidates for the elections to the PLC.⁷ These developments contributed to the movement's electoral defeat to Hamas.

The internal struggles led to splits inside the movement and to the establishment of several armed organizations that identify with Fatah though **they are not part of its official institutions**. These include; Tanzim, Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, Fatah's Preventive Security Force, Fatah Hizbullah, as well as several organizations closely related to Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad.⁸

Sources

- Milshtein, Michael, **Between Revolution and Statehood: Fatah and the Palestinian Authority**, Tel Aviv, Dayan Center, 2004 (in Hebrew).
- Rubin, Barry, [The Transformation of Palestinian Politics: From Revolution to State-Building](#), London, Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Brown, Nathan J. **Palestinian Politics after the Oslo Accords: Resuming Arab Palestine**, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003.
- Anat N. Kurz, **Fatah and the Politics of Violence: The Institutionalization of a Popular Struggle**, Tel Aviv, Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies, 2005.

End.

⁵ Shmuel Bar, **The Palestinian Leadership after Araft's Era**, The Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2004, [full text](#) (in Hebrew).

⁶ See Severe Crisis of Palestinian Representation.

⁷ The "young guard" presented an independent list of candidates at the primaries of the Fatah (11/05). However, ultimately, that list was cancelled and Fatah ran to the elections in a single list. (**Haaretz**, 11/27/05, in Hebrew).

⁸ **Haaretz**, 11/29/05, in Hebrew.