

Point of View No. 57

Who Speaks on Behalf of the Palestinians?

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Against the backdrop of the failure to form a National Unity Government, Hamas spokesperson Fawzi Barhoum, brushed aside the demand by the PLO's Executive Committee for Ismail Haniyeh to resign, claiming that "the PLO does not represent the Palestinian people." (**Ha'aretz** 12/3/06).

The Reut Institute contends that this statement illustrates the Palestinian crisis of representation that constitutes one of the main reasons for the weakness of the Palestinian political system and for the lack of a Palestinian political address.

What is the Issue?

Barhoum's statement expresses the struggle within the Palestinian national movement over who has the authority and responsibility to represent the Palestinian people (see: Crisis of Palestinian Representation). The disagreement over this issue has worsened since the death of Arafat and Hamas' victory in the PLC elections (1/06) and is currently reflected on several levels:

- **Between the PLO and the PA** – The position of the PLO as the Sole Legitimate Representative of the Palestinian people has been internationally recognized since the 1970s. However, since the establishment of the PA, the political center of gravity has shifted to the PA institutions in the West Bank and Gaza to the detriment of the PLO.
- **Within the PA** – Reforms made to the Palestinian Basic Law (3/03) has caused a constitutional crisis that has paralyzed the PA's operational branch. This crisis derives from an overlap between the powers and authorities of the Chairman Abu Mazen (from Fatah) and those of the Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh (from Hamas).
- **Within the PLO** – From Hamas' perspective, its victory within the PA is only the first step along the way to controlling the PLO and ultimately the whole Palestinian National Movement. Hamas refuses to recognize the PLO as long as it does not have representation within the organization.

At the same time, Hamas conducts itself like an independent political entity with complete representational authority. For example, Khaled Meshal, Chairman of Hamas' political bureau and leader of its 'external' wing, has become one of the most significant Palestinian spokespersons, even though he does not have any official authority in either the PLO or the PA.

Why is this Important? Why Now?

- A Palestinian address is the minimum requirement for any political progress.
A political 'address' must have internal legitimacy, authority and responsibility, in order to work towards a particular objective. Therefore, due to the crisis of representation, the Palestinians are unable to conduct themselves through an

agreed upon political framework that can claim to possess the powers and authorities to represent the Palestinian people.

- On the one hand, even though the PLO is the Sole Legitimate Representative of the Palestinian people, in practice, it does not hold any real power. This is due to the fact that the political center of gravity has shifted to the PA as well as due to the absence of such a central Palestinian faction like Hamas, in the national movement.
- On the other hand, the PA does not have any official representational status, it is constitutionally paralyzed, and its policies are heavily influenced by the leadership of Hamas' 'external' wing.

The crisis of representation is one of the main reasons behind the weakness of the Palestinian political system and the reason that currently there is no Palestinian political address that is able to take part in any meaningful political move.

Policy Options

- Israel and the international community should demand clarity from the PA regarding which body has the authority to take part in the political process.
- If the crisis of representation continues, Israel should refer to the PA as the political address that has responsibility and the authority over the residents of Gaza and the West Bank. In this context, Israel could unilaterally transfer authorities and responsibilities to the PA, remove part of the constraints put on the PA since Hamas' electoral victory, and encourage international intervention in the PA in order to build political institutions.

End.