


## After the genocide: an end of cycle in the Palestinian National Movement?

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Envío 26 julio 2025 • Aceptación 28 noviembre 2025

**Abstract:** The Palestinian National Movement (PNM) faces one of the most challenging junctures in its history following the genocide in Gaza, changes in the regional balance of power, and new trends in global politics. During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) made significant advances on the regional and international political and diplomatic scene. However, after signing the Oslo Accords in 1993, it began a rapid decline by linking its fate to this frustrated process. Since then, the division within the PNM has increased, with two self-governing entities (Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip), both of which have proven equally dependent and weak. Their respective strategic approaches were at odds with and neutralized each other. Both have failed equally, mainly due to the balance of power favoring Israel and the unconditional support of the United States. All trends indicate that the current situation will not change and could even worsen. This is evident from the growing Israeli offensive in the West Bank, parallel to the human and material devastation in Gaza. At this crucial moment in its history, the PNM is entering a new and uncertain political cycle, which requires a critical review of its trajectory, with a renewal and unification of its strategic repertoire.

**Keywords:** Palestine; Israel; occupation; colonialism; balance of power; strategy; resistance; Division; political cycle.

### EN Después del genocidio: ¿fin de ciclo en el movimiento nacional palestino?

**Resumen:** El movimiento nacional palestino (MNP) se enfrenta a una de las coyunturas más desafiantes de su historia después del genocidio en Gaza, los cambios en el equilibrio de poder regional y las nuevas tendencias en la política mundial. Durante las décadas de los 60, 70 y 80, la Organización para la Liberación de Palestina (OLP) protagonizó importantes avances en la escena política y diplomática regional e internacional. Pero tras su adhesión a los Acuerdos de Oslo en 1993, comenzó un acelerado declive al vincular su suerte a este frustrado proceso. Desde entonces se incrementó la división en el MNP, con dos autogobiernos (Fatah en Cisjordania y Hamás en la Franja de Gaza), que se han mostrado igualmente dependientes y débiles. Sus respectivas apuestas estratégicas se contraponían y neutralizaban. Ambas han fracasado por igual, debido principalmente al equilibrio de poder favorable a Israel y el incondicional apoyo estadounidense. Todas las tendencias indican que el actual estado de cosas no cambiará e incluso podría empeorar. Así se deriva de la creciente ofensiva israelí en Cisjordania en paralelo a la devastación humana y material de Gaza. Ante este momento crucial de su historia, el MNP se adentra en un nuevo e incierto ciclo político, que requiere una revisión crítica de su trayectoria, con una renovación y unificación de su repertorio estratégico.

**Palabras claves:** Palestina; Israel; ocupación; colonialismo; equilibrio de poder; estrategia; resistencia; división; ciclo político.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction. 2. Re-emergence and consolidation of the PNM during the Cold War. 3. Interval: The slow and growing decline of the PLO. 4. Post-Cold War division and strategic duplicity of the PNM. 5. Conclusion: progress, setbacks and challenges of the PNM. 6. Bibliography.

**Como citar:** Abu-Tarbush, J. (2025). After the genocide: an end of cycle in the Palestinian National Movement? *Polít. Soc. (Madr.)* 62(2), e104229, <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/poso.104229>

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to address the challenges and alternatives for the Palestinian National Movement (PNM) in the aftermath of the human and material devastation of the Gaza Strip, and the escalation of the colonial violence and mass ethnic cleansing in the West Bank. Specifically, it seeks to answer whether the PNM is witnessing an end of cycle after the unprecedented –hecatomb– provoked by Israel’s militaristic response to Hamas-led attacks on 7 October 2023 (7 Oct.); and three decades of division and strategic failure. Although this process remains ongoing, the *status quo* that prevailed until recently has collapsed, and no new, stable scenario has yet emerged.

The theoretical perspective from which this issue is approached combines a neo-realist and a constructivist vision. The former focuses on power politics on the world stage (Donnelly, 2000; Williams, 2005) and, from this logic, it is relevant for analyzing the main dynamics of the actors –state or non-state– confronted in this protracted conflict of colonial origin and nature. The latter contributes to the construction and representation of social reality through ideas, values, norms, identities and interests (Bertucci *et al.*, 2018). Despite their apparent contradiction, “constructivist research is as compatible with a realist worldview as with any other” (Barkin, 2003: 326). Both approaches are complementary insofar as –without mutual interference– one emphasizes “how politics works” and the other “how to study politics” (Barkin, 2020: 4). In this vein, it should be made clear that the PNM is a non-state actor that seeks to exercise its power to end colonial occupation and build statehood, while at the same time providing organization, direction, orientation, identity and interest to an entire people.

In the text, the term PNM tends to be used to refer to the different political organizations that make up the Palestinian nationalist resistance and its goal of national emancipation, regardless of their respective political, ideological and strategic backgrounds and whether they are part or not of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) or the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). The acronym PNM seems more appropriate and inclusive than PLO from the early 1990s onwards, considering the emergence of an Islamist opposition composed of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, instituted in 1981; and more importantly the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), established in 1988. Until then, PLO and PNM were equivalent to each other.

The main internal rifts within the PNM have revolved around the scope of its strategic objectives and the type of resistance to be employed in their pursuit, without understating other key political and ideological differences over the future Palestinian state and external alliances. These are of particular interest because of the projection of the power structure of the international system in the international subsystem of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), with a strong penetration, presence and influence of the major world powers. Without these historical, political, ideological and strategic references, it is difficult to understand its dividing lines, evolution and structure in each period.

To contextualize the stages recorded by the PNM, this text is structured around three key historical phases: the re-emergence and consolidation of the PNM during the Cold War period; the period of its gradual decline; and its post-Cold War drift from the PLO’s accession to the Oslo Accords to the present day. By way of conclusion –inexorably open–, it takes stock of the PNM’s progress and setbacks, along with the challenges it faces in the new phase marked by the ethnic cleansing and genocide in the Gaza Strip, along with the growing military offensive, pogroms and ethnic cleansing in the West Bank. Entire communities are under the threat of being displaced.

## 2. Re-emergence and consolidation of the PNM during the Cold War

The establishment of the Israeli state in the heart of the Arab world in 1948 entailed the geopolitical and demographic transformation of Palestine. This process, known as the *Nakba* (catastrophe), brought about the collapse of Palestinian society. Its eventual demise was driven by political causes, that of ethnic cleansing associated with settler-colonialism, not due to environmental, economic, social or cultural factors as in other societies in the past (Diamond, 2005). Contrary to Israeli leaders’ predictions of the future demise of Palestinians –“the old will die and the young will forget”–, Palestinian society has not only endured but has also reinforced its collective identity, despite all odds.

This traumatic experience of dispossession, expulsion, exile and dispersion has led to the ostracization of the bulk of Palestinian society. Unlike a small minority of urban elites, landowners and emerging middle classes, who possessed greater material and professional resources necessary to survive in exile (Karmi, 2022), the vast majority were of peasant origin, with no resources other than their own land, which has been both their main source of livelihood and identity from which they were dispossessed. It was only a matter of time before these groups deployed their traditional solidarity networks and survival strategies to maintain social order in the face of extreme and catastrophic situations without state coverage. They did so by drawing on repertoires of resistance rehearsed throughout history by peasant societies in the face of climatic, social or political adversity (Taylor, 1982). Expressively, Palestinian refugees recreated their families, communities and identity ties (Sayigh, 1979). Meanwhile, in an instrumental way, the associative fabric was recomposed with the creation of a whole series of associations and civil institutions –“women’s, teachers’, students’, and workers’ organizations as well as charitable societies– were the natural heirs of pre-1948 institutions that had served similar purposes” (Brand, 1988: 4); together with new ones such as that of the refugees.

This process of community, associative and identity reconstruction was accompanied by the flourishing of Palestinian political organizations during this phase. Their recent tragedy, their marginalization in host Arab countries and perceived difference all contributed to reinforcing their national identity (Aruri and Farsoun, 1980). In this context, political entrepreneurs mobilized the organizational and communicative resources

of these fragmented communities in exile channeling political unrest into sustained collective action; they also provided a sense of belonging and identity in the face of exile and perceived abandonment. Although emerging during the second half of the 1950s and early 1960s, these organizations came to prominence only after the Arab defeat of 1967, which marked a turning point in the geopolitical landscape and dynamics of the Middle East with the loss of the rest of historic Palestine—the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem—; in addition to the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights. After this defeat, the strategic repertoire of pan-Arabism was exhausted, Arab states gradually retreated to their respective national borders, and priority was given to recovering the newly lost territories in deferral of the interest in the establishment and expansion of the Israeli state, ethnic cleansing and the refugee problem.

The PLO, created by the League of Arab States in 1964, was initially a bureaucratic structure with no social base or political presence on the ground. It only acquired a genuinely popular and representative character when the main Palestinian organizations took control of it in 1969 (Cobban, 1981). The most prominent of these organizations were the National Movement for the Liberation of Palestine (Fatah), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). These were joined by other minor and largely symbolic groups, lacking any real social support base other than clientelist networks, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GM), which split from the PFLP and was sponsored by Syria; or al-Saiqa and the Arab Liberation Front (ALF), created by the Baathist regimes in Syria and Iraq respectively. Often functioning as extensions of one Arab capital or another, these and other formations pivoted around a leader, were strongly personalistic and lacked a social base. Other Arab regimes tried to manipulate the PNM to serve their interests and regional rivalries. Because of their insignificance, these groupings are not taken as references in this study.

Until that point, the component forces of the PNM shared the same *strategic objective*, the liberation of the whole of Palestine, and the same *type of resistance*, armed struggle. Substantial differences emerged when, during the first half of the 1970s, the concept of phased liberation and the establishment of a national authority in the liberated territory was introduced. This was a first reference to the establishment of a Palestinian mini state in the territories occupied in 1967. The proposal came from both superpowers in the aftermath of the October 1973 war, which in turn led to the abortive Geneva Peace Conference in December of the same year. The aim was to find a settlement based more on the balance of power than on international law.

Faced with this prospect, the PNM was divided between the so-called *realism front*, led by Fatah and the DFLP, and the *rejectionist front*, led by the PFLP, and supported by the PFLP-GC, al-Saiqa and the FLA, among others. The former front was in favor of proclaiming independence over any portion of the liberated territory, where it would establish a Palestinian national authority—State—without renouncing of historical Palestine. The latter rejected this proposal because it enshrined the partition of Palestine into two states as an irreversible fait accompli, with no possibility of completing the liberation of the whole of Palestine.

Another source of division was the type of resistance, violent or peaceful. This was a debate went largely unnoticed but it has remained relevant. Strongly influenced by the Third World, leftist and decolonization experiences of the time, these organizations had a party/militia character and understood that the liberation of Palestine was to be achieved through armed struggle. Only the predecessor forces of the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) and some figures in Fatah considered called for prioritizing social and political mobilization, the creation of a broad national front, and the postponement of the armed struggle, which they considered premature and unviable due to the lack of adequate conditions. Although the liberationist and armed option prevailed, reality showed its limitations. First, the MNP lacked a portion of liberated national territory from which to operate and move freely. Without forest, jungle and mountainous areas, the territory was not suitable for guerrilla warfare. Urban guerrilla warfare was only possible in densely populated areas such as refugee camps or the Gaza Strip. It was in this coastal enclave that the Israeli army encountered the greatest resistance, which it managed to control completely only four years after its occupation in 1967 (Filiu, 2014:144). Second, the social space was weak and fragmented, without a broad social base of support. Israel's tight control of the territory, its policy of reprisals, collective punishment and operating networks of collaborators deterred the population from cooperating with the guerrillas. Finally, the political circumstances were adverse. The elite in the occupied territories was politically, ideologically and organizationally divided between a traditional, conservative and pro-Jordanian obedient sector and an emerging, nationalist and pro-PLO sector. Without these three factors—territory, population and political conditions—guerrilla warfare was unsuccessful (Schiff and Rothstein, 1972: 49–51).

This failure led to the establishment of guerrilla bases in neighboring countries, first in Jordan and then in Lebanon. The Syria regime, however, did not allow them to operate from its soil. In these countries the Palestinian demographic presence did not go unnoticed. More costly, however, was the political, particularly the armed-dimension, due to the inexorable contradictions between the so-called *raison d'être* of the revolution and that of the state. The PNM tried to circumvent these antagonisms but could not avoid them and was eventually drawn in and diverted from its goal.

Other disagreements in the PNM stemmed from diverging *political and ideological backgrounds*. The main line of demarcation lay between the *catch-all party* or populist nationalism of Fatah and the Marxist-obedient—nationalist—left of the PFLP and DFLP. Fatah, as a mass, cross-class party, appealed to different segments of the social structure, from the broad peasant social base—origin of most of the refugees—to the commercial bourgeoisie, middle and urban classes. It sought to transcend ideological differences, class or group interests and religious identities to achieve the broadest social and political consensus. Its nationalist and anti-colonial agenda focused on national liberation. It advocated a democratic, secular state, inclusive of the ethnic and confessional diversity of its citizenry, without determining its economic and social system. It did

not question the capitalist social and economic order, nor did it adopt the Marxist political and ideological assumptions. It considered that all Palestinians had lost the same country, regardless of their socio-economic position.

In contrast, the Marxist left of the PFLP and DFLP had a more defined political and ideological agenda. Their aim was also to structure themselves as mass parties, with vocation of leadership of the national movement or, in Marxist-Leninist terms, as a guide of the revolution or vanguard party. Operating in a largely traditional and conservative social milieu, their social support base was more limited than that of Fatah. It consisted primarily of young university students, intellectuals, liberal professionals, elites of the social movements and trade unions; together with some more urban, secularized and modernized social segments. They positioned themselves as rivals to Fatah, which they portrayed as a conservative force in many social, economic and political domains, without managing to erode its majority following.

This dividing line was reflected in *external alliances* on the regional and global stage. Part of the Gulf Arab countries' political and economic support for the Fatah-led PLO was, in addition to a commitment to the Palestinian question, a desire to counter leftist forces within the PLO. The PFLP and the DFLP were not welcomed in these and other states in the region, except in the nationalist and nominally progressive republics, where they were also viewed with suspicion. The PFLP saw the road to Palestinian liberation as passing through many of the Arab capitals, including those of these republics.

The PLO became a key player in the Middle East. In less than a decade it gained recognition by Arab and Islamic states, those of the socialist camp and those of the Third World or, from 1961 onwards, the Non-Aligned Movement. The PLO was recognized as the "sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people", first by the Arab League summit in Rabat in 1974, and then by the UN General Assembly in November of the same year. On November 22, 1974, the UN General Assembly adopted the Resolution 3236 (XXIX), which reaffirmed "the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including their right to self-determination, national independence, and sovereignty". At the same time, the PLO acquired observer status at the UN, with the right to participate with its views and proposals in deliberations on the Palestinian question, without voting rights. Despite this limitation, the PLO maintained considerable activity in this international organization in order to gain visibility and support on the global agenda. The fact that it was a non-state actor lent further merit to its progress.

In this new context, the PLO focused its political and diplomatic initiative on Western European states aligned with the United States in the Cold War (Kirisci, 1987). PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat (1969-2004) was received in Vienna by Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky (1970-1983) in July 1979, and in Madrid by Spanish Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez (1976-1981) in September of the same year. A process of growing recognition of the PLO by some Western European states was set in motion. The nine member states of the European Economic Community (EEC) –today the EU– then adopted the Venice Declaration in 1980, recognizing for the first time "the right to existence and to security of all the States in the region, including Israel, and justice for all the peoples, which implies the recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people"; mainly their right to self-determination and also a recognition of the PLO, "which will have to be associated with the negotiations".

This progress was reflected in the increased political and diplomatic support in various international fora, which was gradually emulated by the foreign policies of other like-minded or neighboring states. This growing recognition implied the opening of Palestinian representations in host states, ranging –from information offices to embassies– depending on the degree of recognition. Palestinian legations proliferated in various Arab, Asian, African, Latin American and European countries in the East and West. They even outnumbered those of some Third World states and even those of Israel, which had no diplomatic relations with many Eastern European and Third World states. For the PLO, this presence in various world capitals and in multi-lateral diplomacy was vital. The most obvious evidence of its political and diplomatic advances was Israel's campaign of attacks on Palestinian political figures abroad (Bergman, 2018; Ganor and Koblentz-Stenzler, 2022). Western Europe was a major theatre of such covert state terror operations, including the 1981 assassination of PLO representative in Brussels and to the EEC Naim Khader (Khader, 2021).

The PLO in the 1970s and early 1980s was a vibrant movement brimming with enthusiasm. It endowed an entire dispersed and occupied people with organization, representation, political direction, meaning and identity. It put the Palestinian question at the top of the regional agenda, as well as keeping it on the global agenda. The PLO became a reference point for other anti-colonial, national liberation and insurgent movements in different parts of the world. In some quarters the PNM was seen as "the vanguard of the Arab liberation movement, if not a vanguard of the world liberation movement", when it was only "a part of both movements", as Abu Iyad (Salah Khalaf) acknowledged in an exercise of self-criticism and modesty (Palestine Research Center, 1974: 31).

### 3. Interval: The slow and growing decline of the PLO

After experiencing this boom, the PLO began to suffer some setbacks on the ground, leading to a slow decline over the following decades, particularly after its accession to the Oslo Accords. There is no single explanation for this drift, nor was it immediately apparent. Social phenomena do not tend to be explained by a single –or exclusive– cause, although one may predominate over others; and historical processes involve a significant time span in which a whole series of acts and events take place.

The evolution of the PNM was not entirely unrelated to that of the regional and international environment, with its social, political, ideological and strategic transformations. The success and failure of a national

liberation movement is explained by a combination of external and internal factors. These are intimately intertwined in a dialectical relationship, in which one affects the other—and vice versa—in a continuous concatenation. The PLO was no exception. Even less so in the face of such a complex project and such a powerful enemy, which has always enjoyed the unconditional support of the world's leading powers, while operating in a weak, fragmented, foreign-dependent regional environment under persistent foreign intervention by the major world powers, particularly the United States. Without being exhaustive and by way of a summary, it is worth mentioning some of the main facts and events that shaped and largely encouraged this evolution.

First, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 deprived the PLO of a territory from which to operate. After the failure to establish the guerrilla movement on national territory, losing its bases in Jordan and then Lebanon, the PNM was deprived of a territory bordering its own country from which to operate. In the same space, the Syrian regime encouraged a rebellion within Fatah against Arafat's leadership in 1983; and supported Amal's Shia militias in their attacks and encirclement of Palestinian camps between 1985 and 1988. In less than a decade, the balance of power had shifted in a way that was definitely detrimental to the Palestinian demographic, political and armed presence in Lebanon. The PNM's strategic repertoire was exhausted (Sayigh, 1997). The liberationist and armed strategy, initiated two decades earlier, was paralyzed, with no room for maneuver or operability, its fighting forces scattered across several Arab countries and limited to a merely symbolic existence.

Second, the PLO's headquarters moved to Tunisia, far from the region and its social support bases. For the first time in its history, it was not among its people in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, where the bulk of the Palestinian diaspora was concentrated and where the main camps of the 1948 refugees and their descendants were located. The only field of action it had in Tunisia was political and diplomatic (Sahliyah, 1986). From that space, the PLO called for the convening of an international peace conference under the auspices of the UN, with the participation—on equal footing—of all parties involved in the conflict, including the PLO, as well as the permanent members of the Security Council, alluding to the major world powers such as the United States and the Soviet Union. Such an appeal did not find any echo in international society, but it showed the PLO's willingness to seek a negotiated solution to the conflict.

Third, previously and until then, Egypt was considered the main Arab state and epicenter of the international MENA sub-system. However, Egypt renounced its confrontational policy with Israel after sealing the Camp David Accords in 1978 and the Egyptian Israeli peace treaty in 1979, under the auspices of the Carter administration (1977-1981). Israel secured its southern flank by neutralizing the most powerful Arab army and, by extension, deterred the rest. In turn, following the Iranian revolution in 1979, a war was fomented between Iraq and Iran, which lasted from 1980 to 1988. The region's division, weakness and external dependence increased, with changes in its balance of power and priorities. The Palestinian question was for the first time relegated to a secondary position at the Arab summit in Amman in 1987, which prioritized the situation in the Arabian-Persian Gulf. This procrastination was also felt in world politics. Despite a climate of growing détente between Washington and Moscow, with successive talks and ad hoc agreements, the Palestinian issue did not figure or appear to be high on the agenda.

Fourth, the eruption of the first Intifada at the end of 1987 put the Palestinian question back at the center of the regional agenda and captured international attention. This movement of disobedience and civil resistance mobilized both the traditionally active and vanguardist social sectors and the more passive ones, while reaffirming Palestinian self-esteem and collective identity. The uprising surprised both the PLO and Israel. It acquired an important spatial, temporal and social dimension and political impact. In the Palestinian sphere, three trends were discernible. First, it shifted the epicenter of collective action from the outside to the inside, while replacing the main social bases of support from the outside with those from the inside. Second, it witnessed the emergence of Hamas, which reflected the quiet revolution in the regional social, political and ideological space, where Islamism was gaining ground over nationalism and secular political ideologies (Abu-Amr 1994; Mishal and Sela, 2000). It corroborated the thesis that cycles of protest often involve both "traditional upstream" organizations and new ones "created during mobilization" (Tarrow, 1993; Tarrow, 1998). Finally, third, it reinforced the minimalist strategy of territorial engagement, which advocated a Palestinian state in the territories occupied in 1967, to the detriment of the maximalist strategy of liberating all of Palestine by armed means (Tamari, 1991).

The PLO renewed its strategic repertoire and took the political and diplomatic initiative. On 15 November 1988, the Palestinian National Council (PNC), equivalent to a parliament in exile, proclaimed the Palestinian state on the basis of Palestine Partition Resolution 181 (II) of 1947 (Muslih, 1990). Along with this implicit recognition of the Israeli state, the PLO also recognized Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and made explicit its renunciation "all forms of terrorism" (in a Press Conference Statement of Yasir Arafat clarifying his speech before the UN General Assembly in Geneva, 14 December 1988). These were the three demands imposed by Washington to open dialogue with the PLO. Despite these concessions, Israel remained immovable. Its army was unable to quell the popular uprising. Accustomed to interstate warfare against other classical armies, repression was its only response. Despite the division of its society between supporters and opponents of the occupation, it maintained repression and a refusal to negotiate with the PLO. Washington exerted no effective pressure on its ally.

Finally, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 shifted regional and global attention from the Mediterranean to the Gulf, with the consequent external intervention and internationalization of the conflict. PLO mediation to seek a solution at the Arab level failed. Regional polarization did not admit a middle ground. The PLO was identified with Baghdad and paid a high price for its position, which was labelled as ambiguous, to say the least. Consequently, it suffered considerable political and diplomatic marginalization in the regional and

international arena, as well as bankruptcy, due to the cut-off of economic subsidies from the Gulf Arab states. The political capital accumulated by the intifada was squandered. This marginalization and weakening of the PLO came at a crucial moment in the most recent history of the Middle East and international relations. After the Second Gulf War (1990-1991) and the end of the Cold War, the International Peace Conference on the Middle East was convened in Madrid in the autumn of 1991. The PLO was not invited, due to Israel's refusal to sit at the same table with its leadership and also in retaliation for its position during the war. The Palestinian delegation attended as part of the Jordanian delegation, without the presence of recognized figures from the PLO, nor from East Jerusalem.

The successive rounds of negotiations on the Palestinian-Israeli track following Madrid failed to make any significant progress. The PLO and Israel opened a parallel and secret channel, which culminated in the Declaration of Principles signed on 13 September 1993 in Washington, better known as the Oslo Accords. A five-year negotiating agenda was established, in which the most controversial issues – colonial settlements, East Jerusalem, refugees and the final status of the territories – were left for the final stage. This period started with moment of the establishment of an interim self-government, the PNA, in May 1994. Its role was limited exclusively to the civilian administration of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but with no power over these territories or East Jerusalem, a city excluded from these agreements. Oslo even went beyond the “land for peace” formula that inspired the Madrid Conference. Israel saw its right to exist recognized while Palestinian rights were subject to negotiation. Instead of taking international law as a reference, it left the parties at the mercy of their own forces. The result was the imposition of the occupying power's colonial criteria over the rights of the Palestinian people under its military occupation.

#### **4. Post-Cold War division and strategic duplicity of the PNM**

During the Cold War period, the dominant organizations in the PNM had managed to chart a unified strategic course, despite their different political and ideological tendencies, but in the post-Cold War period they became increasingly divided, weak and neutralized. The two main political forces, Fatah and Hamas, with opposing and mutually exclusive strategic agendas, have vied for hegemony in the PNM. A turning point – and at the same time a rupture – between the two stages was the PLO leadership's adherence to the Oslo Accords in 1993. The PNM deepened its internal division and increased opposition to the Oslo Accords, due to their fraudulent implementation, worsening material and political conditions of life under occupation, and growing tendency to prolong and perpetuate the occupation.

Critics described Oslo as a surrender “after the acceptance of defeat by the Palestinians” (Giacaman, 1998: 1) or “a Palestinian Versailles” (Said, 1993). This shift in the PLO's strategy was not unrelated to the evolution of its leadership. Its leaders had spent a decade without daily contact with their social base, except with a bureaucratized intermediate body, effective in issuing instructions from the top down and inefficient in passing on suggestions or criticisms from the bottom up. The distancing from the reality on the ground was compounded by the gradual elimination of historic leaders of Fatah and thus of the PLO. Those leaders had the capacity to counterbalance, balance or push forward other trends in collective or consensual decision-making, especially those of greater strategic scope. A key example was the assassination of Abu Jihad (Khalil al-Wazir) in 1988, at the height of the Intifada, considered the number two in Fatah and the PLO. This removal of historical leaders concentrated decision-making increasingly in fewer hands, in a gradually personalistic and authoritarian drift (Aburish, 1998).

In this dynamic, Arafat surrounded himself with second and third-tier leaders and advisors, who had no historical or relevant role in the PNM and lacked a social support base along the way. In addition to a hasty and erroneous reading of the changes in international relations, this circle was characterized by an excess of pragmatism and opportunism, without much conviction regarding the socio-political participation of broad social sectors. Yet, paradoxically, it was popular mobilization that had rescued the PLO and these same leaders from their political limbo in Tunisia. They were office politicians, not street politicians. In addition to their loss of vigor and stagnation, there were misgivings about the new leadership emerging in the territories occupied during the intifada, and fears that Israel would come to an agreement with it and replace the PLO. In particular, three circles of emerging elites were distrusted: the Islamist Hamas leadership; the young nationalists and leftists at the forefront of the mobilizations; and the Palestinian figures in the occupied territories who were feted by the international media and some Western consulates.

The lack of reciprocity in mutual recognition between the PLO and Israel confirms this thesis. The PLO recognized the right of the Israeli state to exist, and in return Israel only recognized the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, not their right to self-determination or to a sovereign and independent Palestinian state. Oslo reflected the power asymmetry between the parties. It only benefited the stronger actor and disadvantaged the weaker. Under the pretense of the peace process, Israel attempted to normalize the occupation with its increasing territorial expansion and confinement of Palestinians in their towns and villages. These areas, known as A and B, contained the bulk of the Palestinian population, more than 90 per cent, in an area of less than 40 per cent. In the remaining 62 per cent, Israel expanded relentlessly. In this way it further fragmented the Palestinian geography while altering its demography. Negotiations came to a permanent standstill with no progress on the key issues.

Israel shifted the occupying power's responsibility for administering the civilian population under military occupation to the PNA, while maintaining the strategic gains of the occupation. Under the lure of the two-state option, the PLO entered a process ambiguous in its own terms, with no regional and international guarantees or checks and balances, no monitoring and corrective mechanisms, and a dishonest and biased

US mediation (Khalidi, 2013; Elgindy, 2019). Only the PLO made concessions, giving up 78 per cent of historic Palestine to settle for the remaining 22 per cent in for establishing a Palestinian mini state. Israel did not even denounce the occupation and the need to end it; on the contrary, it deepened its policy of occupation and *de facto* annexation of much of the occupied territory.

Throughout this process the PNA has lost its original *raison d'être* and legitimacy. It was established – theoretically – as an interim self-government to be disbanded after a defined, which it has far exceeded. The Oslo negotiating agenda was supposed to be concluded in 2009. If it had run its course, the PNA would have been the governmental and institutional embryo of a Palestinian state. The PNA apparatus was conceived as a transitional self-government that has become semi-permanent. The PNA's permanence in the West Bank has responded to Israel's consent and interest, far from any presumed strength or legitimacy. Its existence has been deliberately prolonged in terms of a sub-state entity, dependent on the outside world and subordinate to Israeli territorial and security demands and interests.

In functional terms, the PNA has been transformed into an intermediary body between the occupying power and the occupied population. Its critics argue that it is a collaborationist entity of the occupation, a security subcontractor (Tartir, 2019). One of the most thorough works on this drift is by Dana El-Kurd (2019). She demonstrates the greater effectiveness of an indigenous authoritarian regime than a foreign occupation regime in controlling a society. This can be seen in the trajectory imposed after the establishment of the PNA in 1994, with the “polarization and demobilization” of Palestinian civil society, which until then had been highly politicized and mobilized. Its associative fabric showed significant strength, of which the Intifada was its most genuine expression.

Oslo was only partially implemented to reverse these trends. Israeli leaders had concluded that the most effective way to end the Palestinian uprising was to put the PLO in charge of the civilian administration of the occupied territories. As Nathan Thrall (2023) notes: “The costs of the intifada had convinced Israel that it would be easier to govern the occupied territories through an intermediary. To that end, Israel allowed the PLO's exiled leadership to return to Palestine to head limited self-rule in the occupied urban areas”. Paradoxical as it was at the time, the Oslo ploy paid off. With the prospect of achieving the state project, state building, the PLO/PNA has ended up achieving the opposite of its intended effect by reinforcing the colonial occupation's mechanisms of domination. This process received considerable technical and financial security support from the US and the EU.

The limitations of the PNA's self-government became obvious. Beyond its para-statal paraphernalia, it was an entity devoid of any sovereign of power. As an intermediate body between the occupying power and the occupied population, it has shown itself to be more effective in exercising power from the top down rather than from the bottom up. No less relevant was the increasing merger of the PLO into the PNA, which it had created for a very specific and transitory purpose. Rather than safeguarding its independent role, the PLO effectively “burned its ships,” becoming increasingly diluted in it. It gambled away all the political capital it had accumulated over the years in Oslo. The failure of this process dragged down the PLO and, consequently, Fatah, which gradually lost its historical legitimacy. The effect is a drastic reduction of the PNA's social support base, as indicated by various opinion polls. Some of these small percentages are due to political convictions, while others are due to personal, economic or professional interests, given that the PNA is the main public employer in the territory.

The outcomes of this dynamic, of constant disappointment and frustration, have been expressed in different cycles of protests, both peaceful and violent. This explains why there have been more violent episodes during the last three decades since Oslo than during the first two decades of occupation. This is manifested in the armed clashes between the occupation army and the various Palestinian militias in 2002, 2006, 2008-2009, 2012, 2014, 2021 and from 2023 to the present; coupled with the increase in structural violence with a steady trickle of events and casualties. Not to mention peaceful protests such as the second intifada in its initial phase in September 2000, the Great March of Return in 2018-2019 and the Unity Intifada in 2021, as well as many other specific mobilizations, local or regional in scope, which have not been reported in the international media. In turn, opposition forces capitalized on political discontent, as was the case of Hamas with its victory in the 2006 legislative elections. The ensuing external and internal pressures to disregard these elections' results erupted into a political and violent confrontation between Fatah and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, with the imposition of Islamist forces in 2007, which “ruptured the Palestinian territories, politically and institutionally” (Baconi, 2018: 133). Israel then declared Gaza “a hostile territory”. Since then, there has been a rift in the PNM from which it has not yet recovered. All repeated attempts at reconciliation have failed. Political, administrative and territorial fragmentation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank increased, with two self-governments: Hamas in Gaza and the PNA in the West Bank. Both are equally far from ending the military occupation and achieving statehood. Israel has also fed back into this political and territorial division to weaken the PNM and prevent a Palestinian state, as even Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has acknowledged (Schneider, 2023; Raz, 2023).

An analysis of the substantial differences between Fatah and Hamas provides a better understanding of this rupture. The *strategic objective* of Fatah and Hamas were initially different and dissimilar in time. The nationalists abandoned their maximum program of liberating all of Palestine for the minimalist program of creating a Palestinian state in the territories occupied in 1967, while the Islamists embraced the PLO's former maximalist program. Only after some time, after winning the 2006 legislative elections, did Hamas show a willingness to accept a version of the two-state solution. There was some skepticism about this concession, which was perceived as a tactical retreat from the idea of a phased liberation of the whole of Palestine. But again, in 2017, Hamas replaced its 1988 founding Charter with the General Principles and Policies Document,

which reaffirmed its commitment to the two-state option. Amid the Israeli offensive against Gaza in 2024, Hamas leaders again expressed their readiness to accept this two-state resolution track.

The *type of resistance* has also been a source of disagreement between the two organizations. Fatah had renounced the use of violence in favor of the political and diplomatic track, while Hamas favored armed resistance. The nationalists had abandoned this option in favor of civil and peaceful resistance. Hamas, on the other hand, after the 1994 Hebron massacre, even turned to suicide attacks and has engaged in successive confrontations with the Israeli army in the Gaza Strip. After a period of appeasement, in which even Hamas prevented operations from Gaza as a tacit counterpart to Israel's allowing humanitarian and economic aid in, the 7 Oct. attacks showed that it had not renounced the use of violence.

The *political and ideological backgrounds* of the two formations are also different. Fatah was based on secular, populist and cross-class nationalism, while Hamas drew from the sources of Islamism, from the mainstream of the Muslim Brotherhood, with doses of anti-colonial nationalism or Islamo-nationalism (López, 2024; Cobban and Khouri, 2024). While Fatah advocates a secular Palestinian state, Hamas shares an Islamist background without fully clarifying the terms of a future state with Jerusalem as its capital along the lines of June 4, 1967. Despite these differences, the two movements overlap in other political and ideological points. Neither questions the capitalist model, nor its neo-liberal aspect; on the contrary, they seem to uncritically accommodate this system without linking it to the colonial occupation of Palestine or the support that Israel receives from the major capitalist powers and transnational corporations. Both are equally averse to any class outline or analysis, instead projecting themselves instead as interclasses and populists. An important key to the rivalry between nationalists and Islamists is that they share and, at the same time, compete for the same social base of support. While the left-wing opposition in the PLO only reached out to narrower social sectors, Hamas is targeting broad segments of the social structure that Fatah has traditionally relied on. Hence, this competition has become unusually intense. In turn, the failure of the Oslo Accords, the erosion of Fatah's leadership of the PNA, coupled with the social, political and ideological transformations in the Palestinian environment and society, have given Hamas an added advantage over Fatah.

Finally, its *external alliances* also show these dividing lines, originating in different and changing historical, regional and international contexts. Fatah's initial external references were to national liberation experiences such as Algeria's and Vietnam, coupled with the fading international alliances of the bipolar era. With the transformations in the power structure of the global and, by extension, regional system, Fatah has sought the support of Western powers, and Russia and China, among others. This position has been reflected in the regional space, where it maintains close relations with regional states and powers aligned with Washington. Its relations with these and other global and regional powers do not resemble that between the US and Israel, which is considered special and unbreakable.

Because of its later emergence and political and ideological affinities, Hamas's external references are concentrated in the MENA region, particularly Hezbollah's model of Islamo-nationalist resistance. No other experience has been closer, despite the different contexts (Muslih, 1999). In this vein, Hamas aligned itself with the so-called Axis of Resistance. In the wake of the anti-authoritarian uprising in Syria there was a certain distancing. Hamas' Damascus-based external leadership left the country. The occasional acrimony with Hezbollah and Iran was eventually ironed out. This alignment did not prevent Hamas from cultivating relations with other regional states –such as Turkey and Qatar– that are politically and ideologically close. At the same time, in regional rivalry, it earned the animosity and enmity of other states, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates; alongside Egypt, which identifies Hamas with the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Seurat, 2022). Hamas's main external alliances are confined to the MENA region and have proved very limited in their power, as illustrated by the fading of the once-magnified Axis of Resistance. In turn, those of Fatah and, by extension, the PNA, go beyond the regional framework, but have also shown serious limitations within the narrower scope of their commitments, constrained by more relevant interests at stake, strategic alignment, external dependence or the lack of political will.

## 5. Conclusion: progress, setbacks and challenges of the PNM

Throughout its history, the PNM has made significant political and diplomatic advances while at the same time experiencing significant material setbacks on the ground, as Israel retaliated locally with each new advance on the world stage. Thus, the PNM has always been exposed to continuous and exponential challenges. This is not the first time it has been at its lowest ebb. This experience of constant ups and downs gives rise to opposing interpretations of its survival and continuity after the genocide in Gaza. From a voluntarist perspective, the PNM tends to be linked to the myth of the Phoenix, of rising from its own ashes. From an opposing viewpoint, which is not necessarily pessimistic or defeatist, it is recalled that this capacity for resilience to overcome adversity has limitations and tends to be exhausted after suffering continuous traumatic events. Finally, from a more realistic position, without resorting to mythology, it is acknowledged that as long as colonial occupation persists there will be a reason for anti-colonial resistance. Even if Israel succeeds in eliminating Hamas and the occupation persists, it is only a matter of time before it is reborn again or a similar resistance organization emerges. It is the occupation itself that generates resistance, not the other way around.

Israel has repeatedly asserted itself militarily. But the superiority of its hard power has not solved the underlying problem of the Palestinian question; on the contrary, it has aggravated it, showing the limitations of its strategic supremacy. It succeeds in winning, but not in convincing. The essence of its colonial project has

denied Palestinian existence and rights from the outset. It does not envisage its resolution, but its imposition by force and conflict management. Strategic superiority has no capacity to destroy ideas, political ideologies, nationalism, the collective identity of an entire people, their values, norms, narrative, will and interests. On the contrary, Israeli political behavior only contributes to encouraging them, as has been the case in other colonial experiences.

In this new phase, still full of great uncertainties, Palestinian political forces will inexorably have to revise and update their strategic repertoire, given the far-reaching transformations in the national space, the alteration of the regional balance of power and the changes in world politics. Not to mention that Hamas and Fatah's strategy has failed, not least because of Israeli military superiority and unconditional US support. In addition to normative and moral issues, Hamas's reliance on armed resistance has proven both ineffective and counterproductive. In turn, Fatah's efforts to lead the PNA in negotiations with Israel also failed; and its subsequent internationalization strategy ran into US and Israeli opposition. Its recourse to international law was more focused on the recognition of the Palestinian state than on decolonization and the exercise of the right to self-determination. Part of the decline of the PLO/PNA is precisely due to focusing all their efforts on a state-building process, which became fictitious amid a rampant occupation. The commitment to statehood in a context of colonial occupation was a futile exercise, which robbed the process of content, continuity, and perspective.

But the greatest failure of both formations is their protracted strategic division, with the resulting weakness and neutralization that has only benefited the occupying military power. The PNM has hit rock bottom. Its renewal, if undertaken, will not be an easy task. It will take considerable time to reconstitute. The genocide and ethnic cleansing in Gaza will leave an indelible mark on successive Palestinian generations. It is a collective trauma, which can be considered even greater than the *Nakba*. PNM member organizations can no longer put their partisan views above national ones, as they have done so far. The genocide had not diminished their ability to overcome their political differences, despite the limitations of the new, still-emerging scenario. But has exacerbated the tendencies that were already present in the PNM. Instead, they must draw lessons from their recent past to avoid making the same mistakes. They will have to overcome the internal rifts that have been dragging on for more than three decades to overcome their languishing decline, or else they will be doomed to become inane forces, like the PNA, sustained by external powers with Israeli connivance. The two analyzed trajectories of the PNM show, first, that its member organizations can maintain strategic unification, despite their political and ideological differences; second, that these organizations evolved from the ultimate program of liberating all of Palestine by armed means to eventually focusing —more because of Israeli military superiority rather than out of conviction— on ending the occupation of the territories occupied in 1967; third, that the armed struggle has proved inefficient and even harmful in advancing and achieving its objectives; fourth, that the participation of its social fabric and civil society as a whole cannot be underestimated from elitist or vanguardist positions; and five, that strategic decision-making requires prior consensus so as not to tear the PNM apart.

The PNM's internal rupture does not seem to have an easy solution, even though its consequences are vital for its own survival and its ability to address the Palestinian question. So far, repeated attempts at rapprochement and agreements have failed. There is no indication that this behavior will not continue in the future. Even during the genocide in Gaza, this division has continued, in contrast to the unity demonstrated by the Palestinian people. In February 2025, the National Conference for Palestine was held in Doha. Its participants expressed the need to relaunch the PLO as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people within a more inclusive and democratic framework, integrating organizations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad into its institutional framework. Various Palestinian social and political sectors have been speaking along these same lines, such as the think tank *Al-Shabaka*, the *Palestine Policy Network*, which includes a significant group of young professionals, academics, intellectuals, journalists, and activists. Regrettably, the PNA did not participate in the Doha Conference, nor did it allow its members or those of Fatah to participate. It claimed that it was an initiative to replace the PLO. Everything indicates that the PNA is based on the same patrimonialist conception of the PLO that led to the unilateral adherence to the Oslo Accords by a political and bureaucratic caste with personalistic and authoritarian tendencies. Some figures in the PNA are confident of playing a role in the post-genocide scenario, assuming the subjugation and restraint of Hamas. They are not only suspicious of islamo-nationalists, but also of a new generational, nationalist and secular elite, disenchanted with the drift of the PLO/PNA and made up of activists, social leaders, academics and intellectuals, highly qualified and known in the international media.

The Palestinians lack real political leadership; they only have rulers, who are not equal to the sacrifice their society is making. What the PNM should do to overcome the current situation is one thing; what will end up happening is quite another. The trajectory of the last three and a half decades does not give rise to optimism. Not to mention the co-opting capacity of regional and global powers to interfere in this process, in one direction or another. Nor do the corporate interests created by a political, bureaucratic and security caste around the PNA. In this regard, one of the most likely scenarios is the exclusion of Hamas from the Gaza Strip and its repression in the West Bank, where at the same time the PNA will be strengthened and reformulated for that purpose, reproducing the same role of civilian administrator of the Palestinian population and security subcontractor to Israel. In the current balance of power, Israel will allow no more than a sub-state Palestinian entity, dependent and subordinate to its territorial and security demands and interests. In the best-case scenario, if some kind of settlement is reached, following Washington's proposal for normalization and extension of the Abraham Accords (2020) with the addition of Saudi Arabia, the most generous option will be a Palestinian Bantustan, not a state.

To sum up, all indications are that the PNM has exhausted one political cycle without a full glimpse of the next. One is still incomplete, and the other has yet to emerge. In this transition, the PNM runs the risk of significant erosion and even marginalization. The PLO that left Beirut in 1982 was never the same again. Its room for maneuver was significantly reduced without its territorial and social base from which to operate. Similarly, Hamas has been deprived of its traditional territorial base of operations, with a significant reduction in its capacity for action. If Israel ultimately controls all of Gaza and even manages to dismantle the tunnels, Hamas's strategy of armed resistance will be inexorably diminished. At best, it will be able to operate on a very limited basis, with isolated sabotage actions. These limitations are heightened in the West Bank, where the occupation army has exercised greater control and enjoys the collaboration of the PA in matters of security. Given this new situation, it is worth asking: is Hamas doomed to transform into a purely political force? Will it dispense with its military wing and, consequently, abandon its strategy of armed resistance to the occupation? Everything indicates that, regardless of its will, the reality that will prevail in the occupied territory will be even more drastic than what it has known until now.

The end of the current political cycle and the emergence of another may not be so clearly perceived from today's perspective. Whatever the nature of the next cycle, the PNM faces a huge challenge. First, to diagnose the new situation and critically review the respective trajectories of its member organizations. Second, to devise a new common, unified strategy accompanied by a new kind of unarmed resistance, more focused on ending colonialism and apartheid than on the creation of a state that is impossible under such circumstances. Third, to develop a discourse that links the Palestinian cause to universal values of human rights, equity and freedom in the global society. Fourth, integrate all resistance organizations under one institutional structure, such as the PLO, and work in coordination. Fifth, democratize the functioning and transparency of the PLO with a scope that transcends Palestinian fragmentation and encompasses the whole of its people under occupation and in the diaspora, making the most of all its human, cognitive, organizational and communicative resources. Sixth, to undertake a generational changeover, with the incorporation of young activists with more democratic and universal values, while at the same time achieving gender equality in all areas of participation, deliberation and organization. Finally, as Azmi Bishara (2022: 281) points out: "Adopting a democratic discourse in the struggle against the Israel colonial apartheid regime will enable the liberation struggle to reclaim its global credibility".

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