

Revival of the PLO – Venus Flytrap?

In its final session, the previous Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) approved a presidential decree applying a provision previously excluded from the Basic Law, according to which all members of the PA's PLC will also be members of the Palestinian National Council in the PLO (PNC) (**Al-Hayat**, 2/14/06).

The Re'ut Institute contends that this provision may serve the interests of both Hamas and Fatah in the revival of the PLO. Therefore, Israel may need to consolidate its policy regarding the division of powers between the PA and the PLO.

What is the Issue?

- The PLO's status as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people was acknowledged by the Arab states' summit (10/74), the UN (11/74), Israel and the USA (9/93). Hence, and in accordance with the Interim Agreement, the PLO represented the PA in negotiations with Israel.
- However, in recent years, the political center of gravity has shifted to the PA, which became the de-facto interlocutor for the political process (see Israel's reservations to the Roadmap).
- This shift instigated a struggle between the PA and the PLO over diplomatic representation. Although **Abu-Mazen** serves as chairman of both, he was clearly **affiliated with the PA** in this struggle.
- Following the elections, Hamas controls the PA while Fatah still controls the PLO. Therefore, **Abu-Mazen is working to revive the PLO's role** as the sole legitimate Palestinian representative.

Why is this Important? Why Now?

- The strategic goal of Hamas is to take over the PLO and lead the entire Palestinian national movement on the basis of a national-Islamic ideology.
- Yet, Hamas' victory may have been a "strategic mishap" on its part, as it came too early. For the first time, Hamas is under direct pressure that may force it to confront the tension between its obligations to the Palestinian society and its ideology and terror policy.
- Hamas' strategy was to influence the political process without being held responsible for its actions. Fatah's control over the PA served this strategy.

Now, following its victory, Hamas faces two alternatives:

- To attempt to overthrow the Fatah from the PLO leadership as well and take over the Palestinian national movement in the short term; *or*
- To leave the PLO under Fatah's control *for the time being*, in order to avoid contacts with Israel and maintain its ideological principles.
- It seems that in order to obstruct the exertion of direct international pressure on the PA, Hamas may be willing to leave the responsibility for the political process to the PLO. Therefore, the new law would:
 - **Increase the PLO's legitimacy** – Hamas' participation in the PNC seemingly increases the PLO's legitimacy as a representative of all Palestinian factions;
 - **Maintain Fatah's dominance in the PLO** – Hamas has no influence in the PLO: their 74 members, who constitute a clear majority in the PLC, will constitute less than 10% of more than

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800 PNC members; furthermore, decisions are made in the Executive Committee (the executive branch of the PLO) where Hamas has no foothold.

- Therefore, the new law serves the interests of both Hamas and Fatah: *Hamas* will maintain its influence on the political process while avoiding responsibility for its actions; *Fatah* will maintain the pretence of control over the political process.

Policy Options

Israel faces the choice between dealing with the **PLO** or with the **PA**:

- **Why the PLO?** – Israel may lean towards supporting Abu-Mazen's initiative, since "reviving the PLO" entails:
 - Preserving the formal structure of the political process with the Palestinians, which is based on the PLO's status as the legitimate Palestinian representative;
 - Maintaining the relevancy of existing agreements;
 - Avoiding implicit legitimization of Hamas' as the leadership of the PA.
- **Why the PA?** – dealing with the PLO under Abu-Mazen's leadership instead of the Hamas-led PA may turn out to be a **Venus Flytrap**:
 - The PLO is not a real "address" – the PA has de-facto control over Gaza and the West Bank. Hence, the implementation of any agreement concerning these areas depends on its cooperation.
 - Dealing directly with the PLO would allow Hamas to obscure the tension between its ideological principles and the political reality, which necessitates recognition, even if implicit, in agreements signed with Israel. Therefore, this option **obstructs exerting effective pressure on Hamas**.
 - Conducting relations with the PA will create clarity regarding the identity of the Palestinian interlocutor with regards to residents of Gaza and the West Bank.
 - Such policy will promote consistency between the election results, the powers and authorities of Hamas and its responsibility towards Gaza and the West Bank thus thwarting Hamas' previous strategy: maintaining influence while avoiding responsibility.

For additional sources see the Re'ut Institute website: www.reut-institute.org:

- About Hamas strategy, see: "[Can Hamas Continue to Enjoy Both Worlds?](#)" (5/24/05); "[Abu Mazen – Asset or Liability?](#)" (1/29/06); "[The Next Palestinian Government – an Address or a Fig Leaf?](#)"; "[Hamas and the PLO – Hostile Takeover of a Shell Company](#)" (in Hebrew, 12/1/05); "[Hamas and the Political Process](#)" (in Hebrew, 1/24/06).
- On the leadership structure of the Palestinian national movement, see: "[Who should be the interlocutor: the PLO or the Palestinian Authority?](#)" (3/9/05); "[Palestinian Elections – Towards Institutional Dysfunction](#)" (12/12/05).
- Also see: Eran Shayshon, "[Towards Representing all Palestinians](#)", *Haaretz*, (6/26/05); Gidi Grinstein, "[Bear Hug for Hamas](#)", *Ynet* (6/8/05)

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