**The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)**

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) has been the embodiment of the Palestinian national movement. It is a broad national front, or an umbrella organization, comprised of numerous organizations of the resistance movement, political parties, popular organizations, and independent personalities and figures from all sectors of life. The Arab Summit in 1974 recognized the PLO as the "sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people" and since then the PLO has represented Palestine at the United Nations, the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries (NAM), the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and in many other fora. In addition to its broad national and political goals, the PLO has dealt with numerous tasks with regard to the life of the Palestinian people in their main communities and throughout the world through the establishment of several institutions in such realms as health, education and social services. As such, the PLO is more than a national liberation movement striving to achieve the national goals of the Palestinian people, including the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.

The PLO was established in 1964 with Arab support. At that time, the PLO was headed by Mr. Ahmed Al-Shukairy and, since then, has undergone significant changes in its composition, leading bodies, political orientation, and even the locales of its headquarters. The leading bodies of the PLO are the Palestine National Council (PNC), the Central Council, and the Executive Committee. Political pluralism has remained a defining feature of the organization, as have democratic internal dialogue and attempts to reach decisions by consensus in its bodies, recognizing the presence of many differing views and competing alliances throughout different periods. In 1968, the organization witnessed the beginning of the engagement of the *Feda’iyeen* organizations (armed struggle organizations), particularly Fateh. In 1969, Yasser Arafat, leader of Fateh, became the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the PLO and, in 1971, he became the General Commander of the Palestine Forces. His name has been synonymous with the PLO and with the Palestinian national movement.

Since the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and the convening of general elections in January 1996 in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including Jerusalem, which were preceded by the return of most Palestinian leaders to their homeland, the Authority’s role and responsibilities continue to increase, in some ways at the expense of the PLO. In the Palestinian territory, as well as outside, Islamic groups remain outside the PLO, which traditionally has not mixed religion and politics.

In general, the current Palestinian situation is constantly changing and progressing towards the establishment of a state and the building of a Palestinian democracy. These changes will affect the PLO, but there is no doubt that, at least for some time, the PLO will continue its role as a very important Palestinian structure for the Palestinian people in the Occupied Territories, in the refugee camps, and throughout the world.

## Structure:

I. Palestine National Council

The PNC, which is the highest decision-making body of the PLO, is considered to be the parliament of all Palestinians inside and outside of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including Jerusalem. The PNC normally sets PLO policies, elects the Executive Committee and makes the necessary changes in its own membership, as well as changes to the Palestine National Charter (a special meeting is required) and to the Fundamental Law of the organization. The PNC also elects a speaker, two deputies and a secretary, who make up the Bureau of the Council. The Council has its own standing committees for various aspects of its work, such as its legal and political committees. The composition of the PNC represents all sectors of the Palestinian community worldwide and includes numerous organizations of the resistance movement, political parties, popular organizations (each of the above is represented by specific quotas) and independent personalities and figures from all sectors of life, including intellectuals, religious leaders and businessmen. The current membership of the PNC stands at X, including all of the 88 elected members of the Palestine Legislative Council (PLC).

II. Central Council

The Central Council, which was established by the PNC in 1973, is the second leading body of the PLO. The Council functions as an intermediary body between the PNC and the Executive Committee. At present, the membership stands at 124, including 15 representatives of the PLC. The last meeting of the Central Council took place in Gaza on 10 December 1998.

III. Executive Committee

The Executive Committee is the daily leading body of the PLO and it represents the organization at the international level. The Committee is elected by the members of PNC and it is responsible to the PNC. Its main function is to execute the policies and decisions set out by the PNC and the Central Council. The Committee is also responsible for adopting a budget and for overseeing the functioning of the departments of the PLO, the responsibilities of which are distributed among its members. Decisions of the Committee are taken by a simple majority. Its membership stands at 18, including its Chairman.

IV. Palestine National Fund

The Fund is managed by a board of directors and by a chairman who is elected by the PNC and who automatically serves on the Executive Committee. The other members of the board are appointed by the Executive Committee, with a maximum of 11 members. Revenues for the fund come from two sources - a fixed tax on the wages earned by all Palestinians living in Arab countries and collected by those respective governments and from financial contributions by Arab governments and peoples, an amount that in the past was substantial.

V. Palestine Liberation Army

The Palestine Liberation Army (PLA) was established as the official military branch of the PLO in 1964, in accordance with the resolutions of the 1st Palestinian Conference (the 1st PNC). At that time, three brigades were established: *Ein Jalut* in Gaza and Egypt, *Kadissiyah* in Iraq, and *Hiteen* in Syria. In practice, those brigades were dominated by the general command of the armed forces of their respective host countries. Over time, however, changes were made to the PLA’s structure, including, for instance, the establishment in 1968 of commando units in Gaza to fight against the Israeli occupation, known as *Kuwat al-Tahrir Al-Sha’biya* (Popular Liberation Troops). Recently, with the establishment of the Palestine National Authority (PNA), important parts of those brigades in Egypt and Jordan were absorbed into the PNA security forces.

VI. Departments

The Organization has established departments that are responsible for several important spheres of work, each headed by a member of the Executive Committee. The departments include the Political Department, the Department of Returnees, the Department of Culture and Information, and the Department of Popular Organizations. Of these, the Political Department is the largest. It directs and supervises the work of Palestinian representation abroad, including Palestinian embassies, missions and offices. The Political Department also represents the PLO and the State of Palestine at international conferences, such as those of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries (NAM) and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). *(For the addresses of all embassies look* *under the Directory of Palestinian Embassies & Missions for the addresses of all embassies*).

VII. Palestinian Institutions

The institutions of the PLO have achieved significant accomplishments through the myriad of social, economic and health services that they provide to Palestinian communities. Among the most important of these institutions are the following:

 Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS): Established in 1968 in Jordan, the PRCS provides medical and health care to the Palestinian people. The PRCS started out with only several small clinics and grew into a substantial medical network with hospitals and medical centers throughout the region.

 Palestinian Martyrs Works Society (SAMED): SAMED provided, throughout an important period, the economic infrastructure of the Palestinian community. It had been established in 1970 originally to provide vocational training to the children of Palestinian martyrs.

 Sons of Martyrs: This organization owns several important facilities in the region that take care of the children of Palestinian martyrs.