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Preliminary Statement of The Carter Center/NDI International Delegation to the January 20, 1996 Palestinian Elections

**Honorable Jimmy Carter and Hanna Suchocka
Co-leaders of the Delegation
January 21, 1996**

We are an international delegation of 40 leaders from 11 countries sponsored jointly by The Carter Center and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI). We are offering a preliminary assessment of the January 20 Palestinian elections in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, recognizing the counting of the votes and the resolution of complaints has yet to be completed.

Our delegation was deployed to all 16 constituencies and visited more than 200 polling stations during the day, asking a set of questions that permitted us to develop a fuller picture of the events than anyone of us could have individually. The delegation includes former heads of state and government, retired diplomats and journalists, elected officials, political party and civic leaders, regional specialists and election experts.

We saw problems before election day, and we saw them on the day of the voting. We do not want to conceal our concerns or minimize the irregularities. To the contrary, we want to raise them in the hope and belief that they will be corrected in the future. Nonetheless, our overall conclusion is that the Palestinian people had an historic opportunity to choose their leaders yesterday, and they did so with enthusiasm and a high degree of professionalism. We view elections, however, in the broader context of democratic development.

This international delegation was invited and welcomed by the Palestinian Authority, the government of Israel, political parties, electoral authorities and Palestinian civic organizations. We were provided access to all stages of the election process and coordinated our activities closely with the European Union Electoral Unit (EUEU) and the several other national and intergovernmental delegations associated with the EUEU. Our delegation came to witness the elections and to report to the public on our observations. But the views that matter the most are those of the Palestinian people; they and they alone will determine the legitimacy of these elections.

The primary purposes of the delegation have been to demonstrate the support of the international community for the peace process and for democratic governance by Palestinians and to provide an objective assessment of these elections. We also have sought to learn about the emerging political process and its implications for democratic Palestinian institutions.

The delegation's mandate included the examination of three aspects of the election process: the pre-election period, the balloting and counting on election day, and the tabulation of results to date. This statement is a preliminary assessment of these issues. In the pre-election period, we relied on the reports of two missions in November and December and on the civic education program conducted by NDI in the last two years. The statements of the two multinational pre-election missions applauded the dedication of Palestinian election officials, the spirit of cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli officials, and the strong support for the elections among the Palestinian public. The second mission was impressed by the consensus among Palestinians that elections were the basis of political legitimacy. At the same time, the missions expressed concerns about the election timetable, threats to freedom of expression and the inequities of the broadcast media. Notwithstanding the limited campaign period and access to the media, candidates told us they were able to communicate their messages to the electorate.

The principal delegation arrived the week before the election. We had intensive briefings and meetings with representatives of the Central Election Commission (CEC), representatives of political parties and independent candidates for the Palestinian Council, both candidates for *Ra'ees*, journalists and human rights activists, independent analysts, Palestinian and international election monitors, and Israeli officials. The delegation then divided into 21 teams and deployed throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip and also in East Jerusalem. The delegation's teams held similar meetings at the local level and then observed the voting, counting and tabulation processes.

We will issue a more detailed report later but here are our preliminary conclusions:

THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

These elections were envisaged by the Camp David Accords and constitute the fulfillment of one of the most significant portions of the Oslo Accords. They also represent a significant step forward for the democratic process. To assess the election, one needs to understand that it emerges from a continuing peace process in which the political environments in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem are quite different from one another.

The delegation was impressed by the high voter turnout, in all areas except East Jerusalem and parts of the city of Hebron, demonstrating the intense interest of the Palestinian people in expressing their will through the electoral process.

We are encouraged by the strong role played by non-governmental organizations in the election. To take just one example, the Palestinian Domestic Monitoring Committee fielded 1,500 well-trained pollwatchers that were present throughout the West Bank and East Jerusalem. They concluded that "the

electoral system worked, despite serious challenges." We share this conclusion, and believe that the work done by the PDMC and other NGOs, like the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, which fielded observers in Gaza, is absolutely crucial to the long-term success of Palestinian democracy. We were also pleased to see so many poll-watchers, representing parties and candidates.

We were impressed too by the dedication and professionalism of the many teachers and other Palestinian citizens who served as polling station officials and by the generally efficient organization of the electoral administration, particularly considering the compressed time period of the electoral process.

Pending future Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, accommodations were found that would provide an opportunity for Palestinians of Jerusalem to participate in these elections without pre-judging the outcome of those negotiations. The agreement to undertake voting in East Jerusalem post offices was a compromise, and four-fifths of the registered citizens of East Jerusalem were required to leave the city and travel distances to cast their ballots at polling stations outside the municipality. A prevailing spirit of cooperation and compromise between Israeli and Palestinian officials permitted the resolution of last-minute disputes over assignment of registered voters to polling places in East Jerusalem and the extension of polling hours on election day.

Prior to the elections, there was widespread fear of disruption at the post offices in East Jerusalem. At the beginning of voting day, Israeli security forces were present in large numbers in front of the post offices, and a number of accredited domestic observers were detained. We were concerned about the videotaping of voters, and that the security presence was excessive and likely was one of the factors explaining the low voter turnout. We immediately conveyed our concerns to the Israeli military authorities. We were pleased that during the course of the day, the Israeli government was constructive and responsive to these concerns. They released the domestic observers, and reduced the size of the military presence outside of the post offices. With some exceptions, they facilitated transportation out of Jerusalem, and they curtailed videotaping of voters. The overall situation improved during the course of the day, and apparently, voter participation increased in the afternoon.

In other areas, the delegation did observe problems, and irregularities during the course of the voting. These included: cases of intimidation by party agents and Palestinian security officials, particularly in certain parts of the Gaza Strip; campaign activities within polling places; some disorganization particularly in polling places with high turnout and some imprecision in procedures for checking voter's identity; and some problems with the secrecy of the ballots.

The newly elected members of the Palestinian Council will assume great responsibility for guiding the development of democratic institutions, including their own. We hope that the Ra'ees and the Council will work to promote a deliberative body that is independent, accountable to the people, and transparent in its activities. The development of a rule of law is essential to promote human rights and democratic processes, including periodic elections.

For too long, Palestinians and Israelis have seemed condemned to mutual fears and suspicions, and to a tragic cycle of violence. The Oslo Accords and the elections are courageous efforts to escape from the past and to build a new future. We hope that the international community will remain involved in the development and democratic process. Progress in the peace process will be advanced as Israelis and Palestinians work together in a spirit of tolerance, dialogue, and mutual respect. We hope these elections will be a critical element in the success of this journey.

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