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## **ELECTION CAN BE AN IMPORTANT STEP ON THE ROAD TO GREATER DEMOCRACY, SAY NDI AND CARTER CENTER OBSERVERS**

*Large turnout seen as "a strong expression of Palestinians' desire  
to choose their representatives through open and competitive elections"*

JERUSALEM -- Election observers with the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and The Carter Center today said that under the difficult circumstance of the ongoing conflict and occupation, yesterday's elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council "can be an important step on the road to greater democracy for the Palestinian people." The delegation's preliminary assessment of the parliamentary election, noting the high turnout at the polls yesterday and in the presidential and local elections over the past two years, concluded that "Palestinians have clearly demonstrated a commitment to democratic elections." It now falls upon the Palestinian political leadership to continue strengthening democratic institutions and addressing critical issues facing the Palestinian people, the observers said.

"It is now up to the elected leaders and representatives to construct genuinely democratic institutions and processes that will bring the peace and prosperity that the Palestinian people deserve, within a free and independent state," said the delegation in its report. "It is universally accepted that democratic elections and democratic governance are about employing peaceful means to achieve political goals. We hope these elections will mark a decisive move for the renunciation of violence by all groups and toward addressing corruption and other issues that are central to improving the lives of Palestinians."

The 85-member delegation observed voting in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. The group was led by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt, former Albanian President Rexhep Meidani, and former Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacio. It included elected officials, electoral and human rights experts, regional specialists, and political and civic leaders from 22 countries in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Europe, Africa and North America.

"The obvious pride and enthusiasm of Palestinians about the election process was evident throughout the voting districts," the delegation report said. "This was reinforced by the professional and impartial performance of election officials."

The co-leaders released the delegation's statement at a press conference in Jerusalem, noting that the statement is a preliminary assessment because the final tabulation of results was not complete and that any electoral complaints which might be lodged will require further monitoring. Among the highlights of the observers' report:

- Within the bounds of an occupied territory, the legal framework for the elections generally compared favorably to international standards, and the adoption of a voluntary code of conduct by all political parties set an important precedent, though not all points were consistently implemented.
- A large number of Palestinians turned out to vote and were able to exercise their franchise without major difficulties. Election day was generally peaceful, and the elections thus far appear to be well administered under the difficult circumstances of ongoing conflict and occupation. Except for restraints in East Jerusalem, the election process was open and highly competitive.
- Travel through checkpoints was generally eased by Israeli authorities, facilitating freedom of movement for election day processes.
- The Central Election Commission (CEC) operated with a high level of confidence among the Palestinian people and the political contestants.
- A significant number of political party and candidate agents and nonpartisan Palestinian election observers were present in the polls, providing transparency to the process and helping to ensure its integrity. Importantly, women played a large role in the election process as election officials, party and candidate agents and nonpartisan observers.

The elections were not without problems, including the following major findings:

- Arrangements for voting in East Jerusalem were agreed to late in the process by Israeli authorities, while possibilities for voting in their neighborhoods remained inadequate for Palestinian voters in East Jerusalem.
- Conditions in East Jerusalem post offices did not provide voting privacy.
- Campaigning by virtually all parties and many independent candidates was widespread on election day in violation of the election law. Though in most instances such campaigning was peaceful, it contributed to tensions and scattered incidents of violence, particularly in Gaza and some localities in the Hebron governorate.

The delegation conducted its assessment on the basis of the *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation*, comparative practices for democratic elections and Palestinian law. NDI and The Carter Center will continue to monitor the process, including the filing and investigation of complaints, and will issue a final report.

*The full text of the delegation's statement, as well as more information about NDI and the Carter Center, please visit [www.ndi.org](http://www.ndi.org) and [www.cartercenter.org](http://www.cartercenter.org)*

*NDI is a nonprofit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. NDI works with democrats in every region of the world to build political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and to promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.*

*The Carter Center is a not-for-profit, nongovernmental organization, founded in 1982 by former U.S.*

*President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, committed to advancing peace and health worldwide.*

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