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Sawsan Ramahi



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Cover image: *Photo of a mural depicting PLO's late leader Yasser Arafat (R) and the late Hamas spiritual leader Ahmed Yassin in Gaza City, Gaza*

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# Hamas and the Palestine Liberation Organisation

Ever since it was founded in 1964, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) has played a leading role in the Palestinian cause. It has also experienced sharp turns over the past 50 years, which have affected the nature of its work as developments in the international arena, especially with regards to a final peace agreement, have affected its role and status. The organisation has also been affected by developments in the Palestinian sector, notably after the emergence of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) as a group with great popular support and the fact that it is not within the PLO framework. As such, it has become necessary to reform the PLO in order for it to regain its role and be an umbrella for all of the Palestinian factions, thus enabling it internally and on an international level.

Fifty years after it was formed, it has become clear that reactivating and rebuilding the PLO and its institutions is linked to comprehensive reform of Palestine and Palestinian affairs. This cannot happen without dialogue between Fatah, Hamas and the other factions, and unless a consensus and joint national programme is achieved. To-date, reform of the PLO has faltered even though it was a critical part of the March 2005 Cairo Agreement.

This report will highlight the most important points in the history of the PLO, its relationship with Hamas and what is hindering its reform.

## **The establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organisation**

The PLO was established in 1964 after the first Arab Summit in Cairo agreed to its formation. The Arab governments wanted to rid themselves of the direct burden of the Palestinian issue and desired an official framework that would limit the formation of the revolutionary movements that began to emerge in the late 1950s.

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The Palestinians have had representatives in the Arab League since the latter was established in 1945, despite the fact that Palestine was under the British Mandate at the time; the first few Palestinian representatives (in order of service) were Musa Al-Alami, Abdul Kareem Al-Alami, Ahmed Hilmi Abd al-Baqi, and Ahmad Al-Shukeiri.

The first Arab Summit tasked Al-Shukeiri with presenting a vision for the second Summit regarding an entity that would speak on behalf of the Palestinian people. After visiting various Palestinian groups spread across the Arab world, his efforts resulted in the election of the Palestinian National Council, which is considered to be the PLO's legislative authority. A draft for the charter and the main governing system was determined; the first Palestinian Arab Conference was held in Jerusalem on 28 August, 1964 for this purpose. The PLO was also established and the organisation's national charter as well as its main procedures were approved, with **Al-Shukeiri elected as president of the legislative council** tasked with selecting its members.

**Al-Shukeiri** worked towards establishing institutions affiliated with the PLO, including the organisation caring for the families of martyrs, the National Fund, the Voice of Palestine radio station, the voice of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation radio station, and the Palestine News newspaper, as well as popular associations to act as the foundations for the PLO and to express the views of various sections of the Palestinian people. He also worked towards expanding the PLO's relations internationally, with countries such as China and the Soviet Union; the socialist bloc and the Non-Aligned Movement; and revolutionary organisations worldwide. This is what made the Palestinian cause a global issue recognised by many countries around the world.

After the establishment of the PLO and its institutions, and the completion of the national unity slogan, the new goal was to work towards liberation. Al-Shukeiri gathered together Palestinian soldiers from Arab armies and created the first brigades of the Palestinian National Liberation Army in Gaza and some Arab countries.

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This was followed by the 1967 Six-Day War, known by Palestinians as the Naksa (“Setback”). At this time, the PLO had to renew itself and put military action at the top of its list. It also had to change, re-structure, and **activate itself**. Armed commando groups from various factions declared war against the PLO at a time when the impact of the Arab governments had declined and the campaign against Ahmed Al-Shukeiri, who rejected the Arab summit decisions in Khartoum and UN resolution 242 regarding the increased activity of the commandos, intensified. He wanted an armed struggle against Israel whereas Arab leaders believed that the international community could be persuaded to put pressure on Israel.

Seven of the 14 members of the PLO’s Executive Committee resigned, and Al-Shukeiri himself stepped down as president during the organisation’s meeting in Cairo on 24 December, 1967. His resignation did not lead automatically to a new national council with a new leader, as the first half of 1968 witnessed disputes amongst Palestinian nationalist parties, especially between Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), in addition to the differences between these parties and the PLO. Fatah tried, by means of its military expertise, to lead national work away from the PLO and called for a conference in Cairo on 17 January, 1968 “to achieve unity and support for the armed struggle and to escalate it”. The conference formed committees and institutions and adopted a charter, but the PFLP and PLO refrained from attending the conference on the basis of competition over leadership. The commandos intensified military action against Israel to gain more popular support.

After discussions and mediation by Palestinian parties, a conference was held in Beirut on 17 March, 1968 attended by both Fatah and the PFLP. They agreed on the formation of a national council made up of 100 members, and a second meeting was held the following month during which they agreed on the formation of a preparatory committee that would select the PNC members, distributed equally amongst Fatah, the PFLP and the Liberation Army, which was part of the PLO. However, the Battle

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of Karameh on 21 March, in which PLO fighters stood alongside the Jordanian Army against the Israelis, whose troops had entered Jordan to attack PLO camps. Although the Palestinians suffered many losses, the battle helped to reinforce Fatah's position and imposed a new equation on the movement.

In July 1968, the Palestinian National Council held its fourth session under the chairmanship of Fatah and Yahya Hamouda was appointed president of the PLO for several months until Yasser Arafat, the leader of Fatah, was appointed as the leader of the PLO executive committee. The charter's name was also changed from the PLO covenant to the Palestinian National Charter and amendments were made to some of the articles to reflect Palestinian nationalism and independence. These amendments focused on three issues: armed struggle as the only way to liberate Palestine; the transition from nationalism to patriotism; and the independence of national decisions. The national council was also re-structured, as the **commandos agreed to form a council of 100 members**, most of whom were associated with military activities, especially those in Fatah, who made up 40 per cent of the total. The Liberation Army had 20 members in the council, and the remaining seats were distributed amongst the popular and independent organisations.

This phase, known as the Palestinian Revolution, sparked-off a new aspect to the political, military and historical conflict. It required the activation of the PLO institutions to issue an Arab resolution during the **Rabat Summit in 1974** to consider the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, in order to open the door to better relations with the Arab and international community.

During the same year, the **PLO became a permanent observer member at the UN**, widening the circle of international relations. It also became a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, as well as other blocs and international bodies.

The National Council's 12th session in June 1974 approved the PLO's Ten Point Programme, causing a division and the

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withdrawal of the PFLP from the PLO; the PFLP formed the rejectionist front with other factions. However, after Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977, the National Council reconciled in Damascus, bringing back those who left as well as adding new groups.

## **The Hamas view of the organisation**

The **relationship between Hamas and the PLO** has taken multiple forms. After years of the PLO and Fatah being the only players in the Palestinian political arena without any serious competition, a political movement with an Islamic, Jihadist and constructive project emerged and threatened the PLO's control over popular Palestinian representation. The Islamic Resistance Movement, known by its Arabic acronym of Hamas, was formed in 1987.

Most of the PLO factions took a fearful view of Hamas in case it would erode their own popular representation. They tried to contain the movement and divide its ranks. Soon, though, some senior PLO members began to acknowledge Hamas's popular representation and its presence in the Palestinian arena. The PLO's second in command, Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad), said: "Hamas is an Islamic force present in the occupied territories, and its base is one of the cleanest combat bases." However, those calling for the exclusion of Hamas did not disappear.

Hamas sought to reassure the organisation that it did not intend to harm or clash with the PLO. The movement's charter declared: "The PLO is very close to the Islamic Resistance Movement; it is like a father, brother, relative, or friend. Would a Muslim harm their father, brother, relative, or friend? We are one nation, one destiny, and have one enemy." Despite the fact that, unlike the Islamist movement, the intellectual reference point of the PLO is based on secularism, Hamas addressed the issue of developing the PLO charter early on: "Although we appreciate the PLO and what it can develop into, and do not underestimate its role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, we cannot replace Palestine's current and future Islamic identity with the idea of secularism; Palestine's Islamic identity is part of our religion."



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Almost a year after the Hamas charter was issued, in response to a question regarding the movement's recognition of the PLO as a representative of the Palestinian people, founder **Shaikh Ahmed Yassin** told Filasteen Al-Muslimah magazine that Hamas distinguished between the PLO as a national framework and the PLO as a political grouping and structure. As a national framework, as stated in the charter in terms of goals and formation, the PLO is accepted by Hamas, but the then current political approach that recognised Israel and the international legitimacy resolutions was rejected. During an interview while in prison, Shaikh Yassin said that the PLO only represented the people in the Diaspora and not the Palestinians at home. "I want a multi-party democratic state ruled by the party winning the elections," he added.

## **Representation in the PLO and Hamas's three options**

After the emergence and subsequent rise to prominence of Hamas, the movement was faced with **three options** regarding the representation of the PLO:

1. Recognise the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. This option could be used by the PLO leadership to market the agreements it signed, any concessions it may make, or any amendments approved by the Palestinian National Council in 1998, which omitted armed struggle from the PLO Charter. It may also be considered a cover for the corruption that is eating away at the PLO and its institutions.
2. Complete refusal to recognise the PLO, with Hamas working to become an alternative to the organisation. This came with many obstacles, including the fact that with Hamas in a position to face off with the PLO it could incite conflicts beyond the intellectual context. Moreover, Hamas would be unlikely to surpass the PLO's achievements, with international recognition by UN General Assembly Resolution 3236 dated 22 November 1974 granting the PLO observer status, giving it the right to participate in discussions over agenda items

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and to give its opinion in this regard. It also has the rights granted to UN member states except the right to vote, nominate and propose draft laws. It was also very difficult for Hamas to propose itself as an alternative to the PLO in the international arena after the international community has already recognised the latter.

3. Recognise the PLO's representation, join the organisation and seek to reform the PLO's institutions. This was the most likely option for Hamas, as it was seeking to correct the PLO's path and work towards joining the organisation after its main factions reached an agreement regarding its restructuring and activation. This approach emerged early in the official statements and documents issued by Hamas. In an Introductory Memorandum issued in 1993, it was stated that Hamas is not an alternative to any other faction and that the movement believes that the PLO is a national achievement that must be preserved. Hamas did not oppose entering the framework of the PLO on the basis that the PLO committed to working towards liberating Palestine, refused to recognise the Zionist enemy and refused to legitimise Zionist existence on any part of Palestine.

## **Hamas and the attempts to join**

There have been many **attempts to add Hamas to the Palestinian National Council** as well as to some PLO institutions, but the movement feared that it would not be given its due share as determined by its representation on the Palestinian street. As mere “decoration” adding to the claims of pluralism within the PLO, Hamas would be unable to change any resolutions adopted by the leadership or the dominant party in the organisation.

In 1988, Hamas refused an offer from the PLO leadership (particularly the Fatah leadership) to be granted 5 out of 450 seats in the 19 Palestinian National Council. At the time, Yasser Arafat was facing the declaration of the Palestinian state, the announcement of the approval of the decision to divide Palestine, Resolution 242, and responding to the US conditions of eliminating terrorism in preparation for beginning dialogue with

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Washington.

When Hamas was invited to join the PNC in 1990, it sent a **memorandum to the council** in which it set out the 10 conditions for its membership. The most important of these was to consider Palestine one unit from the Mediterranean Sea to the River Jordan; not acknowledging the Zionist existence on any part of historic Palestine; an emphasis on armed struggle; stopping the cycle of Palestinian concessions; achieving true and credible representation of the various factions based on their real size; practising true democracy, whether in expressing opinions or in leadership responsibilities; and for the movement to have 40-50 per cent representation in the PNC.

The PLO's participation in the Madrid Conference deepened the differences between the two sides and **Hamas criticised the PNC's decision in Algeria in September 1991**, the session in which participation in Spain was approved. Hamas argued that the formation of the PNC was not qualified to make fate-deciding decisions, and the matter came down to reservations regarding the legitimacy of the PLO's representation.

After 400 Hamas members were deported by Israel to Southern Lebanon in December 1992, the PLO asked the movement's leadership to meet in Tunisia in order to talk about ways to bring the deportees back. That was the public aim, but it was actually done in order to drive Hamas to act on this matter within the scope of the PLO and to integrate the movement into the umbrella group. **Talks were held in Tunisia in December 1992** but they were fruitless as each party insisted on their own view and position, except with regards to the return of the deportees. Hamas proposed, once again, to the PLO that the Palestinian delegation should withdraw from peace negotiations and instead escalate the Intifada and armed struggle in occupied areas. This was supported by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). Although Arafat was willing to allow Hamas to participate in the decision-making process with the PLO regarding the

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deported citizens, he firmly rejected Hamas's demand to withdraw from peace negotiations with Israel. He also claimed that, for this matter, decisions should only be made by the Palestinian National Council, because it was the PNC that encouraged participation in the Madrid Peace Conference. He also evaded Hamas's call for an escalation of armed struggle and suggested dialogue between Fatah and Hamas in order to improve cooperation between the two movements and to build institutions under the authority of the Israeli occupation. The president also reiterated that Hamas would not be able to gain equal status with the PLO but would most likely be recognised as a bloc in an equal position with the other member organisations of the PLO.

Arafat also suggested, once again, that Hamas join the PLO, making it the second group in terms of importance, with 18 seats in the PNC, compared to Fatah's 33 seats and the PFLP's 15. In addition, he offered Hamas the possibility of expanding its representation in the council by means of the seats allocated to the popular associations and the Palestinians in the Diaspora.

Sudan mediated between the two parties and negotiations took place in Khartoum from 1-4 January 1993. These revealed that there were still significant differences between Fatah and Hamas.

Throughout the period 18-21 December 1995, talks were held between the Palestinian Authority (created by the Oslo Accords) and Hamas, during which the Fatah-dominated PA tried to persuade the Islamic movement to participate in the autonomy elections, or at least obtain guarantees that Hamas would not seek to derail them. Hamas did indeed boycott the polls, but kept its promise not to disrupt them.

Between 1996 and the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000, the PA and Fatah no longer had any need to speak to Hamas and the opposition forces, having established control over the area and dealing Hamas a harsh blow in the spring of 1996.

After that second Intifada, Hamas was able to impose itself once again, regain its leading resistance role and expand its popularity.

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It became clear that the movement could no longer be overlooked politically or that the Intifada could be stopped without its approval. This led to new calls for dialogue.

At the time when Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other factions had agreed to talk in an effort to reach a joint Palestinian national programme, they also realised that the next target after stopping the Intifada and paying the dues of the peace process was to hit the resistance infrastructure and disarm its fighters. Thus, negotiations were held in Cairo from 10-13 November 2002 between Fatah and Hamas, and then from 4-7 January 2003 with the participation of all factions.

In March 2005, **another round of talks were held in Cairo** with the participation of Fatah, Hamas and the other factions during which a Palestinian programme stating the right to resist the occupation was adopted. Moreover, a truce was declared until the end of the year and it was agreed to hold legislative elections, re-organise the PLO and reform it based on principles that allow all the Palestinian factions to join.

The agreement suffered a **serious blow** when the PLO leadership backed down from its commitment after Hamas won a majority of votes in the elections held on 25 January 2006. The resistance movement suddenly found itself in power, with 74 of the PNC's 132 seats; Fatah candidates won 45 seats. This result gave the executive leadership of the PLO a shock and made them fearful of losing what they considered to be their last fortress; they held back from making any serious reforms in the PLO's structure and path.

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## Hammas and the reform of the PLO

Hammas believes that the reform of the PLO must be based on the general goals of the Palestinian people, which **Osama Hamdan**, a member of Hammas's political bureau, summed up as follows:

First, in terms of the political programme:

1. Forming the Palestinian National Charter within the following margins:
  - Emphasis on the national constants (land, national identity, the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state, the right of return, the right of self-determination, Jerusalem, the right to resist).
  - Emphasis on the Arab and Islamic identity of the Palestinian cause.
  - Taking into consideration the changes and developments that have occurred since the drafting of the Palestinian National Charter in 1968, including the establishment of the PA.
2. Considering the determination of the political programme as a task of the new executive leadership.
3. Reconsideration of the concessions that harmed the national cause and urging the new National Assembly to rescind them.

Second, the organisational foundations to re-build the PLO. In this respect, Hammas believes in free and direct elections in order to select the members and leaders of the PLO institutions; in the event that elections cannot be held, then the political forces must come to an agreement to choose these figures. On this particular issue, Hammas agrees with all of the Palestinian factions and forces calling for the concept of elections and the abolition of the allocation system. Hammas also agrees on the need to separate the PA and PLO completely, and the need to determine each party's responsibilities and privileges on the basis of the PLO acting as the supreme authority of the Palestinian people.

The Islamic Resistance Movement wants the repeal of the Palestinian Central Council (PCC) as a mediator between the PNC and the Executive Committee in order to allow the PNC to play its role and avoid any marginalisation under the pretext of its inability to convene. It urges the reconsideration of the main system

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and subsidiary regulations in a manner that accommodates the developments that have occurred since the emergence of the PLO, as well as in a manner that absorbs the forces and factions that still remain outside the framework and institutions of the organisation.

Third, with regards to the formation of the Palestinian National Council (PNC), Hamas believes that the PNC should represent all of the Palestinian people, wherever they are, and that it should consist of 300 members, **distributed as follows:**

- Inside historic Palestine: 132 members who are the elected members of the Legislative Council;
- Outside: 150 members, distributed amongst various areas in accordance with the number of Palestinians in the area; and
- 18 former members of the Executive Committee and leaders of the Palestinian factions.

According to Hamdan, Hamas stresses that in the event that elections are unable to be held, then the main forces must agree on the method of selecting the members. However, the movement differs from the other factions in that it believes in the system of parallel voting, combining the votes of those in the Diaspora and those in Palestine, by means of which Hamas achieved a landslide victory in the second legislative elections. It also believes in specifying the percentage of representation in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1948 without naming the territories and without including their number in the quorum. Once the new National Assembly is formed, then two regular sessions will be held per year.

Fourth, Hamas's vision of the Executive Committee of the PLO is, to a large extent, consistent with that of the PLO's constitution, regarding the number of PLO Executive Committee members and the adoption of the concept of free and direct elections by the PNC. It agrees on the determination of the powers of each Executive Committee member. The movement believes that the PNC should elect the Chairman of the Executive directly and not from amongst the members of the Executive Committee, as dictated by the PLO Constitution; and that the PA president and

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Chairman of the Legislative Council should be added as members of the Executive Committee once elected.

Fifth, as far as the Palestinian National Fund is concerned, Hamas focuses on the separation of the PLO and the PA treasury and the restoration of the Fund's Board of Directors by the approval of the Executive Committee; the PNC must determine and approve budgets.

Sixth, Hamas says that the PLO, its departments and institutions must be re-activated. It believes that it is necessary to work towards restoring the PLO officially and legally in order for it to play its role of supervising the PA, the political and negotiations process, and the revival and revitalisation of Palestinian unions and associations at home and abroad. It must also revive the role of the embassies and diplomatic missions abroad in favour of protecting local Palestinian communities, caring for their affairs and defending their national rights. Hamas's call for the re-building of the PLO on new foundations takes into account the developments occurring in the Palestinian arena, most important of which was Hamas's victory in the second legislative elections.

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the desired PLO must involve all of the Palestinian people, including those in the Diaspora, in the territories occupied in 1967, and in the territories occupied in 1948; it must remain a liberation organisation and refrain from getting involved in agreements that undermine its right to do this. It must also remain free to use all means for the liberation of Palestine, including armed struggle, especially if and when it represents all factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

The PLO must also be the supreme reference point for the Palestinian people, acting within a broad and flexible framework and remaining committed to the goal of liberation. It must not be a subsidiary of the current PA or future state; rather, it must be a supreme reference for both of them.



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Reforming the PLO has become an urgent matter in the light of Israel's denial of Palestinian rights and its continual creation of new facts on the ground, including Jewish settlements and the construction of the Apartheid Wall in order to prevent the establishment of a contiguous Palestinian state. Reforming the PLO would thus ensure everyone's participation in confronting the primary challenge posed by the Israeli occupation.

The issue of PLO reform is hindered by Palestinian, Arab and international fears of Hamas domination, even though it was an essential point in the 2005 Cairo Agreement. Such fears surfaced when the movement won the 2006 PLC elections and linger on.

External forces represented by the American administration, some European countries, Israel, of course, and most of the Arab countries who reject any enhancement of Hamas's role, will not allow the movement to join the PLO unless it agrees to accept all of the organisation's policies. The PLO and PA leadership will be under a lot of pressure to block Hamas from taking a leading role in the umbrella body. Some of the smaller Palestinian factions, both within the PLO and aspiring to join it, will not welcome Hamas because its membership would probably be at their expense and may eliminate their role and existence.

Another issue hindering PLO reform is agreement on a unified political programme, as per the Cairo agreement, wherein it was agreed to reform the organisation but the points focused on the renewal of the PNC structures, institutions and elections, and the absorption of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. No agreement was made regarding the political programme for independence and liberation.

There are fears that Fatah's viewpoint will prevail; it believes that those who want to join the PLO must do so in accordance with the political programme adopted years ago with no right to change it. This basically means that the PLO would continue to be squeezed by the terms of the Oslo Accords and their conditions and concessions, rather than representing the aims and aspirations of the Palestinians at home and in the Diaspora, as it is supposed to. These fears will be justified in the event that the

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PLO's political foundations remain the same, the most important of which is the recognition of Israel, and that the official Arab, international, European, and US positions reject changes to the organisation's current programme.

PLO reform thus remains unresolved, even after the latest Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement signed at the Shati (Beach) Refugee Camp on 23 April this year. The agreement called for the formation of an activation committee and the development of the PLO in order for it to carry out its tasks stipulated in previous agreements within five weeks of it being signed. Four months later and we still haven't heard anything about a committee meeting. Instead, Hamas political bureau Deputy Chairman Moussa Abu Marzouk told a conference on "Half a century since the formation of the PLO" organised by the Palestinian History and Documentation Centre in Gaza, that Hamas's recognition of the PLO prior to becoming a member was a historical mistake.

Despite its weaknesses, the PLO remains the appropriate body and authority for advancing the Palestinian national project, not least because of the recognition it has achieved internationally. However, it will only be able to live up to its mandate with substantial reforms in relation to democratic consensus, and representation. These changes will require the rejection of interference and pressure by outside and international actors who are opposed to the resistance option and prefer a compliant, unrepresentative body which can sign away Palestinian national rights and make concessions to Israel in the context of so-called negotiations. These challenges notwithstanding, a revitalised, inclusive PLO can be the vehicle for the achievement of the Palestinian people's long denied basic rights.



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