



MITVIM
The Israeli Institute for
Regional Foreign Policies

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT
STIFTUNG**

The Intra-Palestinian Reconciliation Process and the Arab Spring



Dr. Ido Zelkowitz

June 2013

The Intra-Palestinian Reconciliation Process and the Arab Spring

Dr. Ido Zelkovitz^{*}

The Arab Spring influenced the Palestinians as well. The younger generation of Palestinians began demanding to end the political division between Fatah and Hamas. In response, the veteran leaderships of both movements have launched a process of dialogue between them, aimed at leading to reconciliation. This is, however, a long, exhausting, and mostly technical process, which both movements have reasons to stall. Israel should address the reconciliation process as an opportunity rather than a threat and avoid giving ultimatums on the issue to Abu Mazen.

The Arab Spring that erupted with a storm fundamentally realigned the citizen-state relationship in the Middle East. The authoritarian character of many of the Arab regimes was faced with a political challenge as the masses began demanding their share in national decision-making and the shaping of their future as citizens.

The Arab Spring and its array of revolutions throughout the Arab world found Palestinian society divided, weak and split into two competing centers of power. The first center is the Palestinian Authority, which has official international status and is under the control of Palestinian Authority Chairman Abu Mazen. The other is the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip.

Fatah, which controls the PA in the West Bank, and Hamas, found themselves in a deadlock on the question of the division of power and the possibility of dialogue. The two movements, each operating under different geopolitical conditions in its area of control, viewed the Arab Spring as an opportunity to change the status quo and meet the challenges they are facing.

The Palestinian Spring versus the Arab Spring

When we compare the events of the Arab Spring with those occurring in the Palestinian realm we see fundamental differences. As opposed to their brethren in the Arab world, the Palestinians never had a fully independent government, not to speak of a state. Therefore they never developed independent governmental patterns of full civilian oppression and control by mechanisms of force. This may have begun to change when the PA was established in 1994 and began to develop somewhat unitarian patterns of government. However, the Palestinian struggle has, by and large, been devoted to state building and the struggle (in its various forms) to achieve full independence and sovereignty. Not to mention the internal debate between the various political factions over the borders of the future state.

^{*} Dr. Ido Zelkovitz is a lecturer in the Department of Middle Eastern History and is a research fellow at the Ezri Research Center for Iran and the Persian Gulf Studies, both of them at the University of Haifa.

The Arab Spring found the Palestinian Authority in the midst of a search for international support for a Declaration of Independence at the UN. The Palestinian public was mobilized in support of that goal: in contrast with the Arab countries where the masses rose up against the regimes, the Palestinian street was supportive of Abu Mazen's moves. It should be noted that as opposed to the tendency of the Arab masses to blame their regimes for all their problems, the Palestinian tendency is, first of all, to blame the external factor, namely Israel, for their problems, before aiming their criticism at their own government. That is why despite the economic problems in the West Bank, blame for the situation was placed primarily on Israel and only then on Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. The presidency headed by Abu Mazen managed to keep itself outside of the circles of economic protest that broke out in the West Bank in September 2012. That protest was based on economic realities that contradicted the ones presented by Abu Mazen only a year earlier in his appeal to the UN. There, Abu Mazen tried to portray a picture of economic stability, which is a vital condition for the development of an independent economy.¹

The regional changes brought about by the Arab Spring could not help affecting the Palestinians as well. The young people who saw the regional demand for a redistribution of power between the citizens and the government came up with their own demands. The first and most critical demand by the young generation was to put an end to the political divide between Fatah and Hamas and initiate a real reconciliation process.

That call was supported by an Internet campaign on the social networks and controlled street protests by young people. In Ramallah the administration embraced them cautiously and a token protest tent was erected in the city center, whereas in the Gaza Strip the Hamas police forcefully prevented similar attempts.

The beginning of a reconciliation process: Causes and a descriptive analysis

The voices of the young generation did not fall on deaf ears. The veteran leadership, fearing the emergence of a united front that might confront it with an intergenerational conflict, preferred to enter a dialogue process towards reconciliation. The beginning of the process was made possible by the geopolitical changes that resulted from the Arab Spring.

As for the PA, Abu Mazen was still smarting with disappointment after his effort to achieve UN recognition in September 2011 was thwarted by the Security Council. However, the public was aware of the international sympathy he succeeded in garnering for the Palestinians in the UN corridors. Furthermore, the admission of Palestine as a

¹ "Macroeconomics and Fiscal Framework for the West Bank and Gaza: Seventh Review of Progress," *International Monetary Fund*, Brussels, 13 April 2011.

full member of UNESCO despite US opposition and the economic sanctions it initiated in protest against the move were considered a national achievement.²

Hamas is also undergoing significant changes as a result of the Arab Spring, which influenced its traditional positions regarding the management of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The first blow the movement suffered resulted from the Syrian uprising against the Bashar al-Assad regime, which evolved into civil war. Bashar al-Assad was long considered a strategic ally of Hamas. The bloody war al-Assad is waging against the Syrian opposition, large contingents of which are identified with the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas's parent organization, made it impossible for Hamas leader Khaled Mashal not to take a stand.

After a long period of calm, Hamas began evacuating its Damascus offices (although not completely – many military operatives are still present in Syria) and look for a new home. The unrest and bloodshed in Syria pushed Hamas to seek a new strategic ally. Egypt, where the Arab Spring led to a regime change and democratic elections that brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power, was the destination.

The regime change in Egypt created an opportunity for Hamas. One of the movement's top priorities is seeking recognition that would lead to achieving legitimacy on the international level. In order to achieve that goal, Hamas must first of all gain legitimacy in the Arab world. The road to that goal goes through tightening relations with Egypt. The counter-coup carried out by the Egyptian army against the Muslim brotherhood in July 2013, distanced Hamas ideologically from the Egyptian regime. The army was now the most important political actor in Egypt.

The Egyptian army, suddenly forced to fight over strongholds of political power and required to share its power with the public, had to prove to the world it was still in control of the country and could be trusted, despite the way the West treated Mubarak, who was abandoned to the mercy of the court. The intelligence heads in charge of managing relations with Hamas recognized its troubles and initiated a dialogue with it, leading among other things to the signing of the Shalit deal as well as a memorandum of understanding between Fatah and Hamas, which began a dialogue process between the parties towards reconciliation.³

The entry of Fatah and Hamas into a reconciliation process derived from Hamas's political weakness before the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Actually, the memorandum of understanding the Egyptian intelligence presented to Hamas was no different from a previous proposal presented to the movement in October 2010.

In addition to the uncertainty surrounding the Hamas leadership abroad, when the movement took over the Gaza Strip it began undergoing a process of institutionalization. Once the reins of government were placed in the hands of Hamas, it

² It is important to mention here that not only is the US not considered an honest broker by many Palestinians but it is actually perceived as a representative of global imperialism.

³ Ron Ben Yishai, "IDF investigation: Egyptians took part in the attack near Eilat," *Ynet*, 24 August 2011.

had to develop tools to enable it to provide the residents of the Gaza Strip with a normal life. This required the movement to develop a more pragmatic political line, abandoning military resistance to Israel as a sole political element and combining it with others.

The institutionalization of Hamas, which has no independent economic resources, made the movement increasingly dependent on external economic resources. One of the prices it had to pay for the increasing support it received from Iran before the Arab Spring was acceptance of the Islamic Jihad's process of armament and military and political strengthening in Gaza. Today the Islamic Jihad is positioned as an opposition to the more pragmatic Hamas and an instrument of Iran to secure its geopolitical interests vis-à-vis Hamas and Israel.

Today Hamas is contending with the turbulence of the Arab Spring and attempting to achieve intra-Arab legitimacy as a springboard towards international recognition. The rise of Islamist regimes in Egypt and Tunis has given it a shot of encouragement since those regimes can provide the movement with both the legitimacy it seeks and financial support. After the toppling of Egypt's Mohamed Morsi, Hamas is likely to try and improve even further its ties with Turkey, as to achieve this legitimacy. Mashal already enjoys close ties with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. On 30 September 2012, Mashal was even invited to Turkey, to speak as a guest of honour (together with Morsi) at the AKP congress. Since, Mashal and Ismail Haniyeh have met several times with Erdoğan to discuss prospects for intra-Palestinian reconciliation.⁴

The search for legitimacy is critical for understanding Hamas's conduct. Entry into the PLO would give the movement political status and the ability to take part in the national decision-making processes from which it is presently excluded. After all, the PLO is recognized by the Arab League as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and as such also enjoys observer status in the UN.

Hamas made tremendous efforts to shatter the PLO's constitutional status. The visit to the Gaza Strip in October 2012 by the Emir of Qatar Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani was a significant diplomatic achievement for the organization. It was a breach of the political siege of the Gaza Strip, and had psychological effects too: after all, it was not a visit by a minister or member of the Muslim Brotherhood to see the difficult situation in Gaza, but an official visit by a head of state that is not only legitimate but has strategic influence. It could change the whole attitude toward Hamas in other countries.

Furthermore, the Qatari visit and lifting of the diplomatic siege of Gaza is another stage in widening the rift between Fatah and Hamas. The diplomatic recognition of Hamas harms the political standing of the PLO and reinforces the belief among Hamas's leadership that it can offer a real leadership alternative for the Palestinians.

⁴ "Meshaal: Erdogan is Not Only Turkey's Leader; He is also a Leader of the Muslim World," *Sabah*, 1 October, 2012, <http://english.sabah.com.tr/national/2012/10/01/meshaal-erdogan-is-not-only-turkeys-leader-he-is-also-the-leader-of-the-muslim-world>

Paradoxically, political recognition of Hamas increased following the results of operation “Pillar of Defense”, which began after the assassination of the head of the Hamas military wing and continued with an eight-day exchange of blows between Israel and Hamas on 15-21 November 2012. Hamas managed to manufacture political gains in this campaign and became the de-facto negotiating partner of the Israeli and US leadership through Egyptian mediation. The warfare helped Hamas finally break the diplomatic siege on the Gaza Strip, which suddenly turned into a sort of “Mecca”, after all of the foreign ministers of the Arab League, the Prime Minister of Egypt and the Turkish foreign minister made pilgrimages to it.

For Hamas, the outcome of operation “Pillar of Defense” was the closing of a circle from the beginning of the Arab Spring. If the Arab Spring found Hamas with its back against the wall and politically weak, the Islamic spirit carried by the regimes of the Arab countries, along with the results of operation “Pillar of Defense”, turned the tables. Hamas succeeded in turning its resistance over the eight days of fighting into a myth and leveraged the awareness in the Arab arena that it had succeeded to upset the balance of terror with Israel. At the end of the fighting, Hamas had achieved an internationally guaranteed agreement, while providing itself with the image of the representative of the Palestinian issue and becoming a legitimate and important political player in the region.

The consequences for Israel

The reconciliation process between the Palestinian movements is long, exhausting and mainly technical. The purpose of the reconciliation process appears to be mainly to satisfy public opinion on the Palestinian street following the Arab Spring. Fatah is not eager to share with Hamas its power centers in the PLO, which are backed by many economic strongholds. Furthermore, the heads of Fatah remember well how they took over the PLO from within in 1969, after serving as an opposition to the organization. They are afraid Hamas is planning a similar manoeuvre. Despite wishing to present the public with an achievement, the mistrust between the movements is only growing. Recently Hamas even decided to mark the day of its takeover of the Gaza Strip as Police Day, a day celebrating the restoration of order to the Strip. Members of Fatah protested that initiative.

Until operation “Pillar of Defense” it appeared that the reconciliation process was not ripe for signature. There are fundamental disputes between the sides over the division of military and political power and the process appears to be deliberately cumbersome in order to buy time.

Following the Israeli operation in Gaza, a new window of opportunity has opened for the sides to reach a reconciliation agreement. The process of tactical moderation that Hamas has been undergoing had an impact on the inter-Palestinian reconciliation process. Abu Mazen, who is leading negotiations with Israel, is not alone anymore. Actually, channels of communication have opened between Hamas and Israel, with

Egyptian mediation. This can ignite a process in which Abu Mazen leads a diplomatic effort and Hamas is committed to it as part of intra-Palestinian understandings.

Hamas's political pragmatism, along with the system of guarantees created through US mediation as part of the efforts to achieve a cease-fire, could provide Israel with an opportunity to reach an informal agreement on a long-term cease-fire on the Southern front. Maybe even Turkey could play the role of mediator between Israel and Hamas. Were Israel to ask Turkey – which views itself as a regional superpower – to play the role of mediator between it and the Palestinians, that could assist the re-building of trust between the two countries.

As for Hamas, despite the pragmatic steps it is taking, we must remember that the boundaries of its discourse are limited and that it is a fundamentalist movement with a clear doctrine as to the place and future of Israel. The pragmatization of Hamas does not indicate changes in its ideological approach to the solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hamas's recognition of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders is a tactical measure meant to provide the movement's leadership with wiggle room in order to give a horizon of hope to its public that longs for the establishment of a sovereign state. As far as Hamas is concerned, the PLO can go ahead and conduct political negotiations with Israel. From Hamas's point of view, failure of the negotiations would strengthen the path of armed resistance, which the movement wishes to adopt as a national ethos. It should be stressed that the pragmatization processes are not accepted by all members of the Hamas leadership and create various centers of tension, especially among the young generation of the movement and among its military wing. This strengthens the prestige of the Islamic Jihad and the Salafi factions in the Gaza Strip, which present more militarist and radical positions than Hamas.

Islamic Jihad, which is strengthening militarily, is also developing a functioning political bureau and seeking broader influence. In any future agreement between Fatah and Hamas or between the PA and Israel, Hamas will be required to be the party that contains and modifies the Islamic Jihad.

The relative weakness of both parties, Fatah and Hamas, could provide Israel with a golden opportunity to renew accelerated negotiations towards a two-state solution, while ensuring Israel's security interests and leaving the large settlement blocs under Israeli sovereignty. That is because Abu Mazen needs to show a real political achievement and not just mostly-symbolic as UN recognition of Palestine as a non-member state and as full UNESCO membership. That need has only increased in the wake of the results of operation "Pillar of Defense", which gave Hamas psychological achievements on the Palestinian street and in the Arab world. Abu Mazen intends to continue focusing his efforts on the diplomatic scene, and after operation "Pillar of Defense" his efforts in the UN were even supported by Hamas and Islamic Jihad.⁵

⁵ Al-Aharam on-line, "Abbas hails Gaza PM 'victory' in phonecall: Hamas," <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/58917/World/Region/Abbas-hails-Gaza-PM-victory-in-phonecall-Hamas.aspx>.

The economic crisis the PA is experiencing could be used as leverage to pressure Abu Mazen into accelerated and serious negotiations, in the understanding that a political settlement would strengthen the PA's economy and create a new horizon for its economic and political development. If Abu Mazen manages to create a significant political achievement it will also have an effect on the Gaza Strip, and pose a challenge to Hamas.

Israel must understand that at the moment the Palestinian rift is a given. The partner for advancing dialogue and trying to reach a comprehensive agreement is the West Bank. The Gaza Strip will decide how to act depending on the PA's achievements in this process.

If an agreement is indeed signed between the parties, Israel must treat the reconciliation process as an opportunity rather than a threat. The signing of a reconciliation agreement would mean entrusting Abu Mazen with the portfolio of negotiations with Israel, but the even greater significance of reconciliation is restoring the PA's control over the Gaza Strip, at least on the legal and declarative level. If the Palestinian reconciliation agreement is signed, any political process led by Abu Mazen would also bind Hamas. If that happens, it would be wrong to ignore the outcome of the reconciliation process and give the PLO an ultimatum such as "either negotiations with Israel or intra-Palestinian reconciliation." Perhaps it would be more apt to use the results of the intra-Palestinian reconciliation process in order to promote Israel's interests and commitments in the international diplomatic arena.