

## **A Look at the Palestinian Reconciliation Process**

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The agreement signed between Fatah and Hamas on 12 October 2017, under the auspices of Egyptian intelligence, is in fact a memorandum of understanding that signals the beginning of a process of dialogue between the Palestinian factions on the road to a national unity. It lays the foundation for a gradual progress towards elections, the results of which (assuming they take place) will shape political decisions reflecting the will of the people.

The internal Palestinian split, manifested in the creation of two geographically and culturally distinct political entities – in the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank – has continued for a decade. Throughout this period, the difficulty in bridging the gaps between Fatah and Hamas stemmed from disagreements in the political and social worldview regarding the character of the future Palestinian society and state. It was also a result of the violent circumstances in which the split emerged in 2007 – killings and violent struggle between the two movements in the Gaza Strip.

The cautious optimism among Palestinians following the signing of the Fatah-Hamas agreement is a product of the changing circumstances; first and foremost, the increasing Egyptian involvement in the reconciliation process. It was Egypt, which through a persistent struggle succeeded in creating the current path for the Palestinian dialogue. This has been accomplished after Egypt emphasized its crucial role to both sides and created a system of dependencies.

### **Egypt's complex relations with the Palestinian Authority and Hamas**

Hamas' engagement with Egypt is natural and requested. Hamas needs to open the Rafah border crossing in order to ensure its political survival and to create a normal life routine in the Gaza Strip as much as possible. The Gaza Strip suffers from an acute humanitarian crisis, which stems from the international non-recognition of the Hamas regime, and the three rounds of violence Hamas has dragged the Gaza Strip into since it seized power in the Strip.

The harsh living conditions in Gaza intensified against the backdrop of the sanctions imposed by Mahmoud Abbas on the Hamas's Administrative Council, a body established by Yahya Sinwar that attempted to become an alternative to the institutions of the Palestinian Authority government. The sanctions led to distress, which was further exacerbated in the wake of the electricity crisis in May 2017, in which large parts of the Gaza Strip were not given more than two hours of continuous electricity supply per day.

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The electricity crisis created enormous damage to the weak Gazan economy. The Gaza Strip has over 50 percent unemployment and the share of young people in the population is high. These figures create an enormous pressure, and the Hamas movement feared that economic distress could lead to an uprising against its rule. The sanctions imposed by the Palestinian Authority further exacerbated the humanitarian crisis. They made it clear to Hamas that it was unable to control the Gaza Strip as an independent body, without a budgetary assistance from the Palestinian Authority and strengthening of the relations with Egypt. The leaders of the movement understood that they could no longer govern by simply providing the basic life necessities and by enforcing an order in the public sphere by means of force.

The Palestinian Authority entered into negotiations with Hamas after Abbas tried to gain a position of power vis-a-vis Hamas. Abbas' ability to impose sanctions on Hamas was part of his broader plan. He wanted to restore the Palestinian Authority's control over Gaza through economic pressure that would defeat Hamas. Abbas's plan of action did succeed in creating anger on the Gaza streets. The cuts in governmental funding proved to Hamas that it is unable to develop an independent government. Hamas, fearful of a popular outburst, appealed to Egypt for help.

The risk of chaos in the Gaza Strip is a direct threat to the Egyptian national security. Egypt strives for normalization of living conditions in the Gaza Strip, which would also enable it to sever ties between Hamas and the Salafi organizations in the Sinai Peninsula (ties based on economic interests). By bringing the Hamas leadership closer to Egypt, it would also be able to drive a wedge between Hamas and the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which is considered the historical and most significant rival to the Egyptian regime.

Hamas turned to Egypt after the Egyptian mediation efforts actually were conducted on another track. The Egyptians sought to achieve a compromise and unity within Fatah between Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Mohammed Dahlan, who challenged Abbas and was removed from Fatah ranks in 2011. The mediation efforts failed due to Abbas' insistence on not allowing Dahlan a new and official foothold within Fatah.

With the beginning of the crisis in the Gaza Strip, the Egyptians used Dahlan, a man from the Gaza Strip, to find a temporary solution. Egypt mentioned Dahlan, who controls many funds originating in the United Arab Emirates, as a possible candidate to run the Gaza Strip, alongside or in the place of the Hamas' Administrative Council. Reports of Egypt's mediation efforts to establish a governing body in Gaza, which would be composed of Hamas leadership and associates of Dahlan, have raised the specter with Abbas, who threatened to escalate sanctions against the Gaza Strip. However, after Hamas accepted Abbas' demand to return to his government the civil authority powers in the Gaza Strip, Abbas agreed to send Fatah Senior Official Azzam al-Ahmed to lead reconciliation talks in Cairo.

### **The Palestinian reconciliation process and the Israeli perspective**

In fact, despite the optimistic voices from Cairo, it is not yet possible to talk about a reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas. So far those are only agreements that constitute the beginning of complex negotiations between the Palestinian factions.

The repeated failures of attempts at reconciliation in the past have led the Palestinian public to look at the recent developments with caution and skepticism. Yet, this time there is room

for some optimism because of the Egyptian regime's deep involvement in the process. The Egyptian pressure has already left its mark, and Hamas agreed to hand over the civilian administration of the Gaza Strip to the Palestinian government headed by Rami Hamdallah. In return, the Palestinian Authority pledged to continue to pay the salaries of officials in the Gaza Strip and to avoid harming officials who are not affiliated with Fatah.

Hamas also agreed to transfer to the Palestinian Authority the management of the border crossings of the Gaza Strip and the accompanying security responsibilities. This step effectively breaks the monopoly on arms possession in the Gaza Strip, gained by Hamas after the June 2007 takeover of Gaza. The security of the border crossings is now supposed to be in hands of the Presidential Guard, one of the most elite security forces of the Palestinian Authority. At the same time, the Palestinian Authority demands that the police in the Gaza Strip is also transferred under its responsibility.

The issue of arms bearing is central to Abbas. This was already evident in his campaign for the presidency in 2005 under the slogan: "One authority, one law, and one gun." Hamas, for its part, is not prepared to dismantle its military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, which serve as its main asset. A possible outcome of this disagreement is a postponement in the dismantling of the military wing to the end of the Fatah-Hamas negotiation process, and then conditioning it on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

Unlike the signing of the Cairo Agreement of 2011 and the declaration of intent in 2014, this time the entry of Fatah and Hamas into a reconciliation process has not received strong responses from the Israeli government. The fact that the current Palestinian reconciliation process is being conducted in an intimate manner by Egypt's President al-Sisi, and that the Egyptians view its implementation as a move that will benefit their regional interests, cause the Israeli government to maintain a relative silence. This is accompanied by the fact that the reconciliation process is receiving a backwind from the American administration, which wants to see the Palestinian Authority extend its sovereignty over the Gaza Strip.

The reconciliation process is complex and will be conducted gradually, based on the understandings of the Cairo Agreement. So far, agreements have been reached, but not a comprehensive settlement. Fatah, Hamas, and the other Palestinian factions must reach a formula that will produce a common political timetable with a series of elections, both for the Palestinian Authority and the PLO institutions. This is a central demand for Hamas, which has now agreed to hand over the keys to Gaza's civil administration to the Palestinian Authority in order to try and gain the rule at a later stage. Hamas is interested in reforms and elections in PLO institutions that will allow it to integrate into the PLO and take control over it from within. This would allow Hamas to replace Fatah as the leader of the Palestinian national movement and to gain inter-Arab and international legitimacy.

Israel, for its part, wants Egypt to continue to lead the reconciliation process, and has interest in Egypt and the Palestinian Authority (rather than Israel) exerting economic and military pressure on the Gaza Strip. An Israeli intervention that leads to a failure of the reconciliation process would be a strategic mistake. In principle, Israel should not object to internal Palestinian reconciliation. The restoration of control over all of the Palestinian territories to Abbas will allow him or his successor to conduct political negotiations with Israel that will gain greater legitimacy from his people. This would be possible, if the Palestinian Authority does indeed manage to subordinate Hamas to its authority and to limit the freedom of action of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades in the Gaza Strip.