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The Power Struggle Between Fatah and Hamas Prevents Palestinian Reconciliation and Reunification

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To change the status quo, the Gaza Strip confronts four alternatives: (1) a unifying reconciliation that allows the Strip to return to the control of the Palestinian Authority (PA); (2) a long-term agreement with Israel that would ease the current siege and blockade and allow greater Hamas control; (3) a war with Israel; or (4) the imposition of further PA sanctions on Hamas. Given the developments since Hamas's violent takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007, the prospects for reconciliation seem low while medium for a long-term deal with Israel and high for a war or further sanctions.

A fourth war between Israel and Gaza or the imposition of further sanctions will probably fail to significantly alter the current political landscape but might help postpone the moment of truth or might facilitate a long-term deal between Hamas and Israel. Such a deal will most likely generate further long-term fragmentation in the Palestinian national movement and, in the long run, enforce a more permanent separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip while in the meanwhile trigger immediate PA administrative and financial sanctions on the Gaza Strip. A Hamas-Israel long term deal will also widen the internal socio-political rift and will probably be detrimental to any chance for a future transition to democracy in the two entities.

It seems logical that the realization of this dynamic, not to mention other mutual threats, is sufficient to force Hamas and Fatah to look for new ways to give reconciliation a chance. But it does not. Why? This Brief provides an analysis of the positions of the two sides, as well as the positions of other relevant players. It describes the price that must be paid by both sides to give reconciliation a chance and why the two sides have so far refused to pay that price.

(1) The future of the Gaza Strip: the status quo and its alternatives:

The future of the Gaza Strip is characterized by dangers and risks; its current political and economic conditions leave no room for optimism. No state recognizes Hamas's rule over the Gaza Strip despite the fact that its two neighbors deal with it as the de facto authority. Others, such as the PA, Qatar, the UN and other international actors do the same. All agree that living conditions are continuously worsening. Less than a year ago, a UN report, issued by UNCTAD, indicated that by 2020, the Strip will become uninhabitable, confirming a report issued by the UN back in 2012. Since 2006, Israel has imposed a sea, air, and land blockade and a siege over the Gaza Strip. The siege and blockade have worsened since 2007 after Hamas assumed full control over the Strip. After three wars between Hamas and Israel since 2008, unemployment has increased to more than 50%, rising to more than 60% among the youth, and more than 80% of the population rely on some sort of aid. All economic sectors, along with health, education, power, food, and water, suffer from a deep crisis and a crumbling infrastructure. Last March, various popular demonstrations erupted against Hamas's rule protesting harsh living conditions. They were confronted by Hamas's use of severe force. For all of that, it is not surprising that about half of the Gazan residents wish to emigrate in search for survival and better life.¹

¹ Wish to emigrate stood in March 2019 at 43% in the Gaza Strip compared to 20% in the West Bank. The Gazan percentage stood at 48% in December 2018. See polls by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research; see: <http://pcpsr.org/en/node/752> and also: <http://pcpsr.org/en/node/740>

Palestinian and regional actors have explored various ways of addressing the crisis in Gaza. The following paragraphs describe the four ideas that have received the greatest attention:

A) Reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas: Fatah's and Hamas's policies toward Gaza have become clearer over the past couple of years. Abbas' policy is based on three pillars: (1) a determination to restore *full* PA control over the Strip; (2) a reliance on sanctions and political pressure as the means to force Hamas to surrender full control to his government; and in the meanwhile (3) insure that Hamas fails to acquire legitimacy or a capacity to transform the Strip into a functioning entity or a mini-state. Hamas confronts Abbas's policy with a position reflecting various levels of flexibility and rigidity with the aim of achieving the following three goals: (1) getting rid of the financial and political burden of its rule over the Gaza Strip in a manner that allows it to regain legitimacy and a reintegration into the PA political system; (2) insure its continued military control over the Strip in a manner that guarantees its survival and gives it the last word over all Gazan affairs; and (3) use its military capacity to acquire greater internal legitimacy, as the symbol of resistance, and force Israel to make concessions to improve Gazan conditions.

In other words, the PA, which spends about 100 million US dollars per month in the Gaza Strip, says that a reconciliation that allows its government a full control over the Gaza Strip is the only way out. The PA rests its position on its own interpretation of the terms of the October 2017 Cairo reconciliation deal facilitated by Egypt. That agreement however does not provide the PA a full security control over the Strip; indeed, it does not address the issue. But president Abbas made it clear *at that time* that the success of reconciliation is dependent on Hamas's readiness, along with other factions, to disarm and disband its armed wing. He made it clear that any empowerment of the government must mean "one authority, one law, one administration, one arm, and certainly one political program, that of the PLO."²

By contrast, Hamas's new leadership in the Gaza Strip, led by Yahya Sinwar, showed significant flexibility in its readiness to surrender almost full civil control to the PA government. It was this flexibility that allowed the 2017 deal to be made. But Hamas rejects Abbas' interpretation of the terms of that deal insisting that its guns are "resistance arms" that are as legitimate as the PA, if not more. Hamas leaders made it clear that the subject is not open for discussion; that it is a red line. Sinwar declared that "no one in the world can disarm us, to the contrary, we intend to amass more arms in order to protect our people."³ Despite the fact that the other relevant actors, such as Egypt, Qatar, the UN, Israel, the EU, the US, and others appreciate the PA position and welcome it, all of them assume that it cannot be implemented at this time. Instead, they are willing to support a gradual PA return to the Gaza Strip even if Hamas is not disarmed in the short term.

² The PA president made his position clear in a speech in front of Fatah's Revolutionary Council in October 2017, see: <https://alqabas.com/444569/>. Earlier in that month, Abbas told an Egyptian TV station, CBC, that: "If someone from Fatah in the West Bank carries a gun other than the legitimate gun, I would arrest him, and this is what I intend to do in the Gaza Strip. There must be one legitimate gun I will not allow the replication of the Hezbollah model." See, <https://www.annahar.com/article/675427> عباس-يرفض-استنساخ-تجربة-حزب-الله-في-لبنان-ستسلم-كل-شيء-في-غزة

Abbas went back to the same theme less than a year later when he said in front of the PLO Central Council in August 15, 2018: "We do not want militias in the Gaza Strip; only one legitimate gun is allowed, we want one gun in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip." See: <https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2018/08/15/1166660.html>

³ Hamas leaders issued several statements in October 2017, right after the signing of the agreement. Sinwar's statement, issued on 24 October, confirmed that Hamas has indeed made big concessions for the sake of reconciliation, but made it clear that "our arms are indispensable," adding: "as a nation, we are still in a national liberation phase." See, <https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/content/print/1092903.html>. See also, hadfnews.ps/post/34030 السنوار-لا-أحد-يمكنه-نزع-سلاح-المقاومة-وي يدعو-عباس-لزيارة-غزة

Husam Badran, one of Hamas's senior leaders, was emphatic: "We refuse any discussion of the future of the arms of the resistance, not now nor in the future." See, <https://alqabas.com/444569/>

Hamas leader, Ismail Haniyyeh, showed some flexibility in an interview in an Egyptian TV station: "We are ready to institute a mechanism and a strategy with Fatah and other factions on how to operate the resistance arms and decision. See, <https://www.alhadath.ps/article/65739> هنية-مستعدون-لوضع-استراتيجية-مع-الفصائل-ل8% Haniyyeh added: "the arms of the [civil] security sector should be unified and should come under the control of the state."

B) Long term agreement between Hamas and Israel: In the absence of reconciliation, Hamas will find itself searching for alternative means to improve living conditions and consolidate its control over the Gaza Strip. One such alternative is to reach a long term cessation of violence, a *hudna*, with Israel that allows for the easing of the siege while providing Hamas with the financial capacity to deliver services, through foreign aid such as that of Qatar, or through custom and tax revenues that can be generated by directly collecting custom duties and other taxes on goods that enter the Gaza Strip. This solution to the crisis in the Gaza Strip finds some support among Israeli right-wing circles viewing it as the means to sustain and consolidate Palestinian divisions thereby reducing the prospects for Palestinian statehood.⁴ The idea gained serious attention in mid-2018 after most relevant players came to the conclusion that reconciliation was no longer a viable option, at least in the short run.

This alternative does not require disarming Hamas but it seeks to bring about a significant improvement in economic and living conditions of Gazans, greater freedom of movement for individuals, entry of some banned goods, such as cement, and the opening of the Strip's border crossings. It also seeks to solve some of Gaza's long-term problems, such as electricity and water, and perhaps explore ways to gain access to seaport and airport services. Hamas also hopes to convince Egypt to permanently open the Rafah crossing for the movement of passengers and goods on both directions so that the Strip would be able to import and export through Egypt, not just Israel, which in turn would allow Hamas to directly impose its own customs and thereby improve its administration and service delivery. For this solution to succeed, Hamas would have to agree not only to a ceasefire, but also to a resolution to the issue of Israeli prisoners held by Hamas, stop building offensive tunnels under Israeli territories, and stop those border activities that started with the March of Return, such as incendiary balloons and others. For Israel, such an arrangement would insure quite along its southern borders allowing it to devote its attention to Iran and deal more effectively with the US regional plans as well as the so-called "Deal of the Century" and the possibility of annexing parts of the West Bank.⁵

C) The military solution: Hamas does not have an effective military solution to the crisis in the Gaza Strip. But things are different for Israel. Some Israelis, such as former minister of defense Avigdor Lieberman and the Likud Knesset member, Avi Dichter, think that Israel can and should destroy Hamas's military infrastructure and reoccupy the Gaza Strip for an extended period during which preparation can be made for the possible return of the PA or the imposition of some other arrangement.

Israel, however, does not have a Palestinian, Arab, or international partner for such war. Moreover, it seems that the Israeli army estimates that the cost of a military action along these lines would be very high and would outweigh the potential benefits and that a full control over the Gaza Strip would require the re-occupation of the Strip for years, not months, and that the elimination of Hamas's power would leave the Strip in chaos and ruin creating fertile ground for groups and ideas more extremist than those of Hamas. Moreover, this solution finds resistance from some of the right wing figures who hope to keep Hamas as a potential threat to the PA thereby keeping the Palestinians divided.

D) Palestinian financial and administrative pressure: As long as Hamas rejects PA demands for "one gun," the belief that more pressure might work is likely to gain momentum within circles close to Abbas. The PA might impose further punishment similar to what it inflicted in the past and might expand the previous

⁴ See for example the plan proposed by Israeli minister of intelligence and transportation, Israel Katz, in June 2016 to build an artificial island off the coast of the Gaza Strip. The island would contain facilities for a port, an airport, and an infrastructure for water desalination and power generation and would be supervised by the Palestinians and international actors. Israeli defense minister, Avigdor Lieberman opposed the idea when it was proposed. Despite that opposition, the plan was submitted to the Israeli cabinet for discussion in more than one occasion between 2016-2018. The idea was first proposed in 2000 by a joint Dutch-Israeli team. See: <https://www.albawaba.com/news/israel-revisits-plan-build-artificial-islands-coast-gaza-1070762> and, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-wants-someone-to-build-a-5-billion-island-off-gaza--for-a-seaport-hotels-airport/2016/06/20/e45ce6fc-7948-4a10-bef3-0f782b030739_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4763c7b516f0

⁵ After a recent security cabinet meeting in June, a Palestinian website reported that Yuval Steinitz, Israel's Minister of Energy, has indicated that a long term deal with Hamas is feasible, see: <https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2019/06/20/1252753.html#ixzz5rVAPwxhw>

measures by considerably reducing the monthly funds it transfers to Gaza and by stopping many of the services, in the social and communication sectors, it currently provides. It might also deny Hamas's legitimacy in the West Bank and hold elections restricted to that area.

It is likely that such steps would meet strong opposition from Israel, Egypt, Qatar, and the UN due to concerns regarding the implications of such measures on the humanitarian conditions in the Gaza Strip and the increased prospects for another war between Hamas and Israel. Most of the Palestinian public will most likely oppose such measures. Indeed, current polls indicate that more than 80% of the public demand that the PA remove all sanctions currently imposed on the Gaza Strip.⁶

(2) Why Fatah and Hamas prevent reunification

Assigning blame for the continuation of the split is no mystery. Both Fatah and Hamas are equally responsible. Both parties impose preconditions; placing their partisan interests over those of the public: Hamas refuses to abandon the "resistance arms" and Fatah refuses to abandon the demand for "one gun." The truth is the "resistance arms" is nothing but a military infrastructure that provides Hamas with power and immunity allowing it to control the Gaza Strip and acquire a regional standing. Similarly, "one gun" gives Fatah the exclusive control over the formal Palestinian security sector, as most of its personnel comes from its own ranks, which in turn allows it to easily gain hegemony over the Palestinian political system.

It is true that Hamas's military capacity plays a central role in resisting any Israeli incursions in or attacks on the Gaza Strip. Yet, this fact does not negate the role it plays in bolstering the power of a political party and that Hamas has actually used this capacity in 2007 to settle scores with Fatah and militarily defeat forces loyal to the elected president in an internal strife thereby giving it a domestic advantage and consequently splitting the Palestinian authority politically and territorially. It also goes without saying that the PA needs to have full control and monopoly over coercive force in order to be able to enforce law and order, insure internal security, help deliver justice and other public services, and empower the private sector. But here too, there is no doubt that "one gun" guarantees continued control over the entire political system by a political party that in fact lost the parliamentary elections and has no legal claim to "one gun" without winning new parliamentary and presidential elections.

Moreover, it is not clear that Hamas's military capacity is essential for protecting the Gaza Strip. Israel has unilaterally withdrawn from that area and, given the economic, demographic, and political costs, is not indicating serious interest in reoccupying it. Similarly, Fatah's insistence for "one gun" is belied by the constant presence of Israeli troops in PA-controlled areas in the West Bank, a presence that undoubtedly harms PA standing among the Palestinians but does not prevent it from dominating the domestic scene.

(3) The public as a spectator:

True, the Palestinian public, or most of it, is a spectator watching a losing political game played by Fatah and Hamas. It expects those who benefit from disunity to put an end to it. This however does not mean that the public has not given its own view regarding the positions of the two sides. Public opinion surveys show clearly that a majority of the Palestinians rejects the imposition of preconditions on reconciliation, as those stated by Fatah and Hamas. True, the overwhelming majority of the public (78%) wants the entire unified security sector to come under the control of the PA government. Yet, the public sees no contradiction between siding with a unified chain of PA security command and the continued existence of the various Gazan armed groups. Indeed, responding to Abbas's demand for "one gun," 72% of the public indicated opposition to disarming these groups as a condition for reunification.⁷ In other words, the public,

⁶ PSR's March 2019 poll indicated that 82% of the public demand removal of all sanctions, see:

<http://pcpsr.org/en/node/752>

⁷ See PSR's December 2018 poll: <http://pcpsr.org/en/node/740>

notwithstanding the fact that it was Hamas who initiated the process that led to disunity and used arms, the “resistance arms,” no less, to defeat its domestic opposition, rejects the views of Fatah and the PA and sides with Hamas. Why is the public so forgiving?

It is obvious that the public is strongly in favor of a single unified authority in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and that it supports a PA monopoly over coercive force as the means to enforce law and order and maintain internal security. But the public, which is also strongly in favor of national unity as a top priority, realizes that it is impossible to disarm Hamas without triggering a civil war. Therefore, it is willing to temporarily turn a blind eye to Hamas arms, pending the restoration of unity and the establishment of a new legitimate political system. More importantly, part of the Palestinian public, even if not the majority, believes that ending Israeli occupation cannot be achieved except by resort to arms and that the continued existence of armed groups in the Gaza Strip, despite its risks to societal peace and PA capacity, remains a national necessity more important than the “one gun.”

(4) Conclusion: the price of unity:

The main Palestinian beneficiaries from the current split are Fatah and Hamas; both are willing to sacrifice the public interest in order to maintain their own party interests. In doing so, they, knowingly or unknowingly, weaken the Palestinian position at a critical moment in their history, a moment in which they have lost most of their Arab allies and have become victims to a regional conflict that threatens their interests. In tolerating a situation in which two million Palestinians are deprived of participation in their country’s economic, social, and technological development and in which two authoritarian political systems, devoid of accountability and oversight, are created, the two parties show a lack of responsibility and an abandonment of the initiative. All Palestinians pay for this outcome, as regaining the initiative is unlikely without regaining unity.

But unity can only be regained incrementally. Indeed, only an electoral legitimacy is stronger than the legitimacy of the “resistance arms,” thereby making it possible to enforce a “one gun” policy. Thus, the price that must be asked of Fatah in order to achieve unity is to agree to postpone the demand for “one gun” until after the holding of elections. Similarly, the price that must be asked of Hamas is to commit itself to accept the verdict of the voters. To make the “resistance arms” or the “one gun” sacred is to sacrifice national unity in order to preserve the selfish interests of a political party. Both sides should use the election campaign as an opportunity to lobby for their positions and both should accept the judgement of the public. One should not expect success from any other alternative.

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