

Prospects for Palestinian Unity After the Arab Spring

YOUSEF MUNAYYER*

ABSTRACT

If the revolutions sweeping then Arab world are in fact its “spring” then the Hamas/Fateh reconciliation deal may very well be the first buds this season produced. Whether or not this reconciliation deal will bear any fruit for the Palestinian people, however, is yet to be seen. To best understand the factors affecting the success of the deal, one must have grasp of the history of the relationship between Hamas and Fatah and the role of external actors in that relationship as well. In this commentary I lay out a history of tensions and the role of the US and Israel in driving wedges between the parties. Similar challenges will undoubtedly face this reconciliation attempt and the greatest chances of success can be achieved when both parties put the interests of the Palestinian people ahead of the demands of their external patrons.

On May 4, 2011, the Palestinian factions Fateh and Hamas signed a reconciliation agreement ending a four-year division, which debilitated Palestinian domestic politics and national strategy. The agreement, signed with much fanfare in a post-Mubarak Cairo, raised hopes as well as questions. Could this really be the end of division between bitter rivals and the start of a unified Palestinian movement? How will such an agreement be tested over time? How will Washington and Tel Aviv respond to the agreement, and how does this all relate to the “Arab Spring?”

These many questions are as interesting as they are important. To attempt to provide answers to them requires an understanding of the genesis of the division between these two Palestinian factions, the history of their relationship prior to the recent period, and the differences in both interests and ideology.

* Department of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland, yousefmunayyer@gmail.com

The reconciliation has potential for ending a division that debilitated Palestinian politics and divided Palestinians for several years

The Origins of Tensions

Fateh, like Hamas, derives its name from an acronym; its complete title is *Haraket Tahrir al-Watani al-Falasteeni* (The Palestinian National Liberation Movement). Fateh was founded in 1959, prior to the Israeli occupation of the West

Bank and Gaza Strip, and before the initial implementation of the Oslo Accords the vast majority of Fateh's leadership was based outside of historic Palestine.

Hamas, whose complete title is *Haraket al-Muqawamwh al-Islamiyeh* (The Islamic Resistance Movement), is the largest of several Islamist movements in Palestine. Its origins are in the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, and while the Palestinian branch of the Brotherhood was established as early as 1946, the strength and coalescence of political Islam in Palestine really began to take root in the 1970s and 1980s.¹

It was during this period that Fateh was making a transformation of its own. Fateh rose to prominence among all Palestinian factions in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) by successfully carrying out many guerilla-style attacks on Israeli interests. In 1964, the Arab League recognized the PLO as the "sole, legitimate representative" of the Palestinian people. In 1967, the Arab League passed the "3 NOs" in Khartoum, but when the PLO obtained observer status at the United Nations in 1974, Fateh, whose leadership largely overlapped with the leadership of the PLO, began to moderate its positions and actions.

The outbreak of the first *intifada*, or Palestinian uprising, in 1987 highlighted the contrast between Hamas, an organization inside Palestine, and the Fateh-dominated PLO which was based in Tunis at the time. Hamas was formally established in 1987 as an outgrowth of the Brotherhood and both fomented and benefitted from the activities of the first *intifada* resistance. The PLO quickly realized it had little leverage over the events on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza, which had grabbed the world's attention. The Muslim Brotherhood increased in popularity among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, which was evidenced by results in student elections at Palestinian schools and universities – a commonly-used barometer of Palestinian public opinion in the absence of other formal electoral institutions.²

The Fateh-dominated PLO hastily moved to make changes to its strategy. Within months, the PLO declared the independence of the state of Palestine with

reference to UN resolutions relating to the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. This amounted to implicit recognition of the state of Israel, which would later be formalized, and initiated a process, which would culminate in Oslo by way of Madrid.

The Oslo accords are largely recognized by many Palestinians to have been a strategic mistake resulting in American-led negotiations and the further colonization of Palestinian territory. At the time, however, the Oslo accords gave the Fateh-dominated PLO something they much desired – the chance to formally operate in Palestine for the first time in its history. But it also cost them a great deal of revolutionary legitimacy amongst Palestinians, which had been hard-earned over years of guerilla attacks and extensive sacrifices. Hamas stood clearly opposed to the Oslo accords and has continued to do so, often using the Fateh-led PLO's concessions in the Oslo process to score political points. While Oslo brought these Palestinian leaders back into Palestine, it had sown seeds of division, which would grow in the years to come.

The PLO returned to the Occupied Palestinian Territory as a different organization than it was when it rose to prominence. Israeli decapitation attacks had eliminated much of the leadership, including Wadie Haddad (1978), Zuheir Mohsin (1979), Ali Hasan Salameh (1979), Mamoun Meraish (1983) and Khalil al-Wazir (1988). During this time, Yasser Arafat had also solidified his control over the PLO's various decision-making bodies.³

When Arafat's PLO returned in the form of the newly Oslo-created Palestinian National Authority (PA), many Palestinian activists from different ends of the political spectrum began to feel that a distant and disconnected leadership was returning from abroad to lead a national movement that had already organically developed through the *intifada*. The political environment was conducive to internal divisions, particularly between Fateh, which had embraced a negotiations strategy, and the rising Hamas, which believed negotiations to be futile. Oslo and its implementation would frequently be used as a wedge to drive these factions apart.

In 1991, Hamas formed the *Izz-ed-Din al-Qassam* brigades, which unchecked would pose a challenge to the Palestinian Authority's ability to keep security commitments made through the Oslo Accords. Hamas' use of violence, particularly

The Oslo accords are largely recognized by many Palestinians to have been a strategic mistake resulting in American-led negotiations and the further colonization of Palestinian territory

suicide attacks, was relatively non-existent prior to 1993. It was after an Israeli settler, Baruch Goldstein, massacred nearly 30 Palestinian civilians when he opened fire on worshipers praying in the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron that Hamas' suicide bombings began to increase.⁴

The Palestinian Authority (PA) was in the awkward position of having to fulfill commitments of security for the Israelis against other Palestinians who the Israelis also occupied. Prior to the first PA elections in 1996, a major benchmark in the implementation of Oslo Accords, tensions between Hamas and the Fateh-dominated PA were on the rise as Hamas and Israel exchanged suicide attacks for assassinations. Many saw the elections as an extension of the Oslo Accords, which they believed to be against the Palestinian national interest, and the PA was well aware of the prospect of violence surrounding the election. Hamas and the PA entered talks to come to an agreement on security before the vote. They eventually came to an agreement in December of 1995 prior to the elections scheduled early the following year. The talks in Cairo were complicated by Hamas' displaced political leadership, which was in Amman at the time, but ultimately an agreement was reached in which Hamas pledged not to launch attacks against Israel from PA-controlled areas so as not to damage the PA's credibility.

The agreement seemed like it would be short-lived when on January 5, 1996, Israel assassinated a high-ranking engineer in the *Qassam* brigades, Yahya Ayash. Despite the deep anger and cries for retribution, violence immediately before and during the elections was limited. All this would change in the spring when a series of bombings everyone expected were ultimately carried out to avenge Ayash. The PA came under tremendous pressure to clamp down on Hamas, which led to the most significant political repression of Hamas activists it had experienced to that point in its short history. The PA and Israel collaborated in massive waves of arrests of Hamas affiliates, and arms confiscation of *Qassam* brigades members ensued.⁵

Within a few short weeks, elections in Israel yielded a new right-wing government led by Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who made the case that the Oslo process was a sham better than Hamas ever could. The opening of an ancient tunnel underneath the Old City of Jerusalem infuriated masses of Palestinians, and the building of a new Israeli colony of Har Homa practically rendered the two-state solution dead. Har Homa is located on Jabal Abu Ghneim inside the Bethlehem governorate but within the unilaterally-declared, illegally-annexed Israel municipality of Jerusalem. Its presence would jeopardize any clean separation of the municipality's eastern half, home to mostly Palestinian Arabs, from the re-



Photo: EPA

It comes as no surprise that the eventual reconciliation deal was signed only months after a historic revolution ousted the octogenarian Hosni Mubarak and his close security confidant Omar Suleiman.

mainder of the municipality. Palestinians have always held that without Jerusalem as their capital there could be no agreement.

With peace talks destined to fail and with an Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu who was happy to help them meet that end, Hamas witnessed the Fateh-embraced strategy of negotiations faltering. A last minute attempt on the part of President Bill Clinton to end a decades-old conflict finally collapsed when talks at Camp David in 2000 yielded no constructive results, and the Al-Aqsa *intifada* broke out amidst continued settlement expansion and the election of another right-wing government led by Ariel Sharon.

The 2006 PLC Elections and the Split

The bloody years of the second *intifada* coincided with a continued decline of the Palestinian economy and increased desperation among Palestinians, who concurrently witnessed the corruption of many government officials. Among Palestinian voters, it had become clear that a change in leadership and perhaps a change in national strategy were necessary. Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections in January of 2006 provided an opportunity to act on the desire for change since, for the first time, Hamas would enter elections nation-wide.

The fact that Hamas won the PLC elections was not nearly as important a determinate factor in the dynamics of the Hamas/Fateh relationship as the Israeli

and American reaction to the election result would be. The U.S. State Department lists Hamas as a designated Foreign Terror Organization and Israel has maintained a policy of refusal to negotiate with them as well. So when Hamas' election victory in January of 2006 resulted in a mandate for their "Change and Reform" ticket to form the next PA government, a number of questions were raised: 1) Would Israel negotiate with the PLO if the PA was run by Hamas? 2) Has Hamas' stance on Oslo changed since it ran for and won PLC elections, an institution created by Oslo? 3) How will the United States respond given its commitment to supporting the PA under Mahmoud Abbas? 4) What role would Fateh play in the new government?

We soon found out the answers to all these questions. The day after the election, legislation was circulating through Congress to eliminate any U.S. financial assistance to the PA. Israel froze the transfer of all Palestinian tax revenue to the PA, Hamas was no more inclined to accept the "Quartet Principles" and Fateh decided not to form a unity government and, in the words of PLO negotiator Saeb Erakat, would remain a "loyal opposition" party.

As the "Change and Reform" party was still assembling a government, the PA coffers ran low and PA employees were unable to get paid. The two parties needed to find a way to work together and form a unity government. Washington was not amenable to Hamas-Fateh reconciliation and used its purse strings to persuade Fateh to stay away from Hamas unless Hamas accepted the "Quartet Principles." These principles included recognizing Israel, renouncing violence and abiding by previously made agreements. Of course Hamas rejected these principles for various reasons, not least among which was the absence of a requirement for reciprocal recognition of Palestine and their clear and long-held opposition to Oslo.

For Hamas accepting the "Quartet Principles" would all but eliminate any differences between them and Fateh (with the most significant exception being each party's views on the role of religion in state affairs). Washington and Tel Aviv both knew such a bar would be unreasonably high for Hamas to meet but were unwilling to change their demands. Fateh and Hamas were again on a collision course and the wedge was once again driven by Israel with the support of the United States.

Fateh and Hamas have different versions of the events, which took place in Gaza in June of 2007 when Hamas obtained control over the Gaza strip. Fateh refers to the events as a coup. Hamas refers to these events as preventative measures guarding against a U.S.-backed Fateh coup. There is likely some truth to both

narratives. Hamas may very well have had well-designed contingency plans to rout Fateh in Gaza long before 2007, but investigative reporting published in *Vanity Fair* citing leaked government documents supports Hamas' claim that they were targeted by Washington and Ramallah.⁶ Precisely what happened is unknown and will not likely be known anytime soon, but the blood spilled during those events only deepened distrust between the two parties.

The outbreak of the first *intifada* in 1987 highlighted the contrast between Hamas, an organization inside Palestine, and the Fateh-dominated PLO which was based in Tunis at the time

With Hamas now in control of Gaza and Fateh in control of the West Bank, each was able to implement their version of the Palestinian national project and allow voters to decide which approach they preferred. Each had their successes and their failings. For their part, Hamas was largely able to effectively control and secure Gaza from internal threats, and given their limited military and economic resources, the ongoing Israeli siege and regular Israeli incursions, Hamas' government acted efficiently under severe constraints. But Gaza was no liberal democracy. The already traditional and conservative Gaza Strip saw an increase in the enforcement of moral codes and laws, which were previously uncommon. The leadership of Hamas, who did not want to be seen as Islamic fundamentalists, was clearly compromising on religious issues with the most religious elements of their party.

The Fateh-dominated West Bank began to receive significant donor aid once the June 2007 split took place. Salam Fayyad, the newly appointed Prime Minister of the Ramallah-based PA, had significant experience at the World Bank and would face the task of getting the PA's accounts and the West Bank's economy back on track. Donor dollars poured in and stories emerged about wild economic growth figures in the West Bank. This ultimately would be more of a public relations stunt than any real marker of progress. Severe dependence on donor dollars compromised the PA's independent policy making. Also, while year-to-year growth numbers were impressive in terms of rate, the size of the West Bank's economy was still smaller than pre-2000 levels, and an economy saturated with donor dollars raised serious questions about the sustainability of development. Despite the attempts at mitigating the harsh conditions of life under occupation, Palestinians living in Area C of the West Bank were in worse economic conditions than Palestinians in Gaza. While the influx of donor dollars created a lifeline to an economy under

With Mubarak and Suleiman out of the way, the paradigm that supported U.S. reach in the region crumbled and the environment for reaching a reconciliation agreement was ripe

occupation, it also was used to keep Palestinians in American-led negotiations, which ultimately proved to be little more than a cover for continued Israeli colonization of Palestinian territory.

During the period of the split, each party attempted to eliminate their respective opposition. Perhaps for Hamas, limiting opposition was easier. The Gaza

Strip was much smaller than the West Bank in size and far more contiguous. The logistical task of securing it was far easier, thus the use of political arrests was less necessary. In the West Bank, the PA only had security jurisdiction over Area A and relied on collaboration with Israeli security for political repression in other areas. In Area A, the PA's "Preventative Security" served as regime security guards and allegations of political arrests, some of them massive roundups, became common. Human rights groups, both Palestinian and international, began raising serious concerns about torture in PA prisons, including some cases where prisoners died in custody. These allegations would later be confirmed by Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.⁷

Reconciliation: Failed Attempts and Success (?)

Throughout the period of the split, various reconciliation attempts failed when they were preceded by arrests or roundups of Hamas affiliates in the West Bank. The most notable of these instances was in the summer of 2009. In the spring both Netanyahu and Abbas met with President Obama who was just months into his first term. Netanyahu came to Washington with a message about incitement and Abbas, perhaps in an attempt to win the good graces of Obama, returned to Ramallah and presided over a period of significantly increased arrests of Hamas affiliates in the West Bank days and weeks before scheduled reconciliation talks in Cairo. Whether these arrests were deal-breakers for Hamas is unclear, but they certainly did not hesitate to use them as an excuse.

Cairo itself would pose another obstacle. It comes as no surprise that the eventual reconciliation deal was signed only months after a historic revolution ousted the octogenarian Hosni Mubarak and his close security confidant Omar Suleiman. Hamas never trusted Mubarak or Suleiman as the brokers of a reconciliation deal. Egypt had long been an ally of the United States and was cooperating in the Israeli-led siege of the Gaza Strip by closing its crossing at Rafah. But it

was classified State Department cables leaked through *Wikileaks* that showed that Hamas' suspicion was justified. In one cable, Omar Suleiman was quoted as candidly outlining his view of Egypt's role in the inter-Palestinian dispute. "Egypt's three primary objectives with the Palestinians," Suleiman said, "were to maintain calm in Gaza, undermine Hamas, and build popular support for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas."⁸

Trust-building will be the most important aspect of getting this agreement to work. Both parties have deep distrust for each other based on a history of tense interactions

With Mubarak and Suleiman out of the way, the paradigm that supported U.S. reach in the region crumbled and the environment for reaching a reconciliation agreement was ripe. Fateh had grown tired of consistently-failing U.S.-led negotiations, and when Washington reversed its policy to seek a settlement freeze, it became very clear that the Obama administration would be no different as a broker than any of its predecessors. Both Fateh and Hamas had gambled and lost in terms of domestic legitimacy. The costs with the Palestinian electorate, however, were higher for Fateh than for Hamas, because even though Hamas' government was unable to provide prosperity or security, it was not seen as collaborating with Israel or the United States and engaging in a process that was inherently biased against it as Fateh did. The apparent failures of Hamas and the apparent successes of Fatah will ultimately be qualified in the eyes of the Palestinian voters based on the role of U.S./Israeli pressure (in the case of Hamas) or support (in the case of Fatah).

Still, both parties needed reconciliation, and changes in Washington and Cairo allowed Hamas to accept a vague agreement at the end of April 2011. The question of whether or not this agreement will last is still open. As with most vague agreements, the devil is in the details and the agreement itself is quite short on details. One can expect, given the history of the relationship between the parties, that certain issues like security coordination and elections will likely be the biggest tests.

The agreement signed by both parties in Cairo calls for elections to be held exactly one year from the date of the signing. If done right, this one year period could serve to advance the reconciliation agreement and re-legitimize the institutions that have lost credibility due to the split. But there are a number of challenges facing this end. First, an electoral commission, which is supposed to regulate the elections, must be sufficiently independent. With no legitimate government to enforce the decisions of an electoral commission, Hamas affiliates in the West

Perhaps the most important element in successful trust building for each party will be avoiding any moves which appear to put the demands of foreign powers above Palestinian national unity

Bank and Fateh affiliates in Gaza may very well remain susceptible to political repression at the hands of the opposition. Second, an agreed upon transition government must be formed that will support the electoral commission, but as of this moment no government has been announced. The overlap between the security apparatuses in both the West Bank

and Gaza and their respective factional governments is significant. Without each party accepting joint security control of the territory it governs it is unlikely that either party will trust the security apparatus and allegations of politicized arrests will continue.

It is here that outside influence is most likely to jeopardize the reconciliation agreement. The security apparatus in the West Bank has been largely subsidized, trained and supported in a collaborative effort between the United States, Jordan and the Ramallah-based PA. Washington and Tel Aviv will likely object to any involvement of Hamas in this apparatus and will likely insist that command and control remain firmly in the hands of its trusted Fateh allies. Fateh may once again be faced with the choice of damaging its relationship with Washington or continuing with reconciliation.

Trust-building will be the most important aspect of getting this agreement to work. Both parties have deep distrust for each other based on a history of tense interactions. The release of all political prisoners held by each party is an important measure for building trust, and while the parties have discussed this since signing the reconciliation, little traction has been achieved thus far. In fact, a Hamas statement on June 7, 2011 alleges four of its affiliates were arrested in the West Bank while it welcomed the release of two others previously arrested. Political arrests will continue to challenge reconciliation and the degree of security collaboration between the West Bank PA and Israel will allow Tel Aviv leverage over a wedge it can drive further between the two factions. Perhaps the most important element in successful trust building for each party will be avoiding any moves which appear to put the demands of foreign powers above Palestinian national unity.

Conclusion

In sum, the reconciliation has potential for ending a division that debilitated Palestinian politics and divided Palestinians for several years. Many challenges

remain and the history of the Hamas-Fateh relationship and the nature of the diplomatic dynamic between Ramallah, Tel Aviv, and Washington provide many reasons to be skeptical about reconciliation working before it has even been significantly tested.

It is important to note concerns that reconciliation may potentially be damaging to the larger Palestinian interest. While Palestinians overwhelmingly want to see an end to the division between Hamas and Fateh, many Palestinians, particularly in the diaspora, are concerned that an agreement between Hamas and Fateh may lead to power sharing between the two largest factions in the Occupied Territories and further exclude diaspora Palestinians from the decision-making structures addressing their destiny. If reconciliation between Hamas and Fateh is the first step toward a larger reformation of Palestinian representative institutions which pre-date Oslo, then it might be a significant opportunity to strengthen Palestinian decision-making and provide long lost legitimacy to its institutions. However, if the factions moved to reconcile simply based on short-term political interests, including the desire to garner legitimacy or to posture internationally prior to seeking recognition from the UNGA this fall, then this reconciliation agreement will likely fail when tested down the line and ultimately will not have changed the *status quo*. Only time will tell.

Endnotes

1) Jeroen Gunning, *Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 34-39.

2) Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search For State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 552-637.

3) As'ad Ghanem, *Palestinian Politics After Arafat: A Failed National Movement* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 2010), pp. 71-90.

4) Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 64-73.

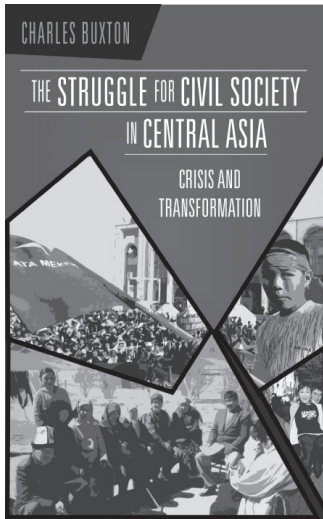
5) Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence*, pp. 72-76.

6) David Rose, "The Gaza Bombshell", *Vanity Fair*, April 2008.

7) Rory McCarthy, "West Bank ends torture of Hamas captives", *The Guardian* (January 13, 2010), retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jan/13/west-bank-torture-hamas-prisoners>

8) Leaked State Department Cable from US Embassy in Cairo, retrieved from <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/07/09CAIRO1349.html>

Everything you ever wanted to know about civil society actors in Central Asia, but **didn't** know where to turn...



"A refreshingly accessible perspective on civil society from an intellectual/practitioner. It illuminates the idea of civil society but is also deeply informative on its context and potential in the Central Asian region."

— Jenny Pearce, Professor and Director of the International Centre for Participation Studies, Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford

ISBN: 978-1-56549-299-8 • \$24.95, PAPERBACK



**Order in North America via
Kumarian Press**
www.kpbooks.com

Eurospan | group

**Order in Europe and UK via
Eurospan**
www.eurospanbookstore.com

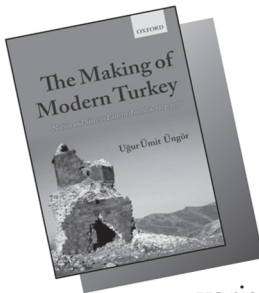
NEW FROM OXFORD

20% discount

Valid until 31th July 2011 only if
orders are placed directly with OUP
Quote code **AAFLY5**

Winner of the Erasmus Research Prize (Praemium Erasmianum) 2010

Winner of the Keesje Hodshon Prize, awarded by The Royal Holland Society of Sciences and Humanities



The Making of Modern Turkey

Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950

By Ugur Ümit Üngör

Üngör offers a novel perspective on the establishment of the Turkish nation state and highlights how the Young Turk regime, from 1913 to 1950, subjected Eastern Turkey to various forms of nationalist population policies aimed at ethnically homogenizing the region and including it in the Turkish nation state.

April 2011 | 978-0-19-960360-2 | Hardback | 336 pp | ~~£65.00~~ £52.00

For more information please contact: history.uk@oup.com

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
www.oup.com/uk