

In search of a Palestinian leadership



Yassir Arafat, Chairman of the PLO and President of the PA
Photo: Frode Løvlie

This brief argues that even a successful reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah will fall short of providing the leadership the Palestinians need. Their domestic legitimacy are simply too frayed. Instead it argues that the hope for a united, legitimate Palestinian leadership rests on the creation of a new, non-factional and mass-based movement, independent of external patrons and free from international interference.

Increased Israeli settlements on the West Bank, continued blockade of the Gaza Strip, the separation barrier, unresolved questions of land division, the status of Jerusalem, and the right of return for Palestinian refugees – the number of seemingly insurmountable issues facing the now dormant peace process between Israel and the Palestinians are many. Resolving these issues is the core challenge for any revived peace process. If a peace process is to have any chance of success, however, the Palestinians need a strong, legitimate and united leadership to accommodate their aspirations and demands and to negotiate on their behalf. Without such leadership, the peace process will most likely continue as it has for the past 20 years – as a steady stream of demands from Israel and the international community on the Palestinians, and with no solution in sight.

Divide et impera – self-inflicted and imposed

The political fall-out between the Fatah-ruled West Bank and the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip in the summer of 2007, ushered in an extraordinary chaotic era in Palestinian politics. However, inter- and intra-faction fighting among Palestinians political movements is nothing new. In the years following the establishment of Israel in 1948, Palestinian politics was divided between the pan-Arabists and the nationalists. After Israel's victory over the Arab armies in the Six Days War of 1967, the pan-Arab movement lost momentum and the nationalists – represented by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and led by Fatah – effectively monopolized Palestinian politics. Even the shared organizational framework offered by the PLO,

however, did not stop its member organizations from fighting within and among each other. And, despite the unrivaled authority of Yassir Arafat as the leader of the Palestinians, an ongoing competition between the exiled and the domestic leaderships continued to undermine the unity and legitimacy of the Palestinian leadership (Jamal 2005, pp. 30).

With the establishment of Hamas on the eve of the first intifada in 1987, came the beginning of the end of the PLO hegemony of Palestinian politics. A truly homegrown, religio-nationalist movement, Hamas was well-placed to challenge the authority of the then still exiled PLO leadership. Vehemently opposed to the accommodating negotiation track initiated and led by Fatah, Hamas successfully positioned itself as the *de facto* opposition movement in Palestinian politics. From the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the return of the PLO leadership to the occupied Palestinian territories and the establishment of a Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in 1994, domestic Palestinian politics has largely been defined by this competition between Hamas and Fatah (Jamal 2005, pp. 73). The rivalry reached a highpoint in 2006, when Hamas surprised everybody – themselves included – by winning the elections to the PNA parliament, the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) (Shikaki 2006).

While this tradition of infighting and factionalisation among the Palestinian movements is a sad affair in itself, it has also exacerbated the asymmetry between them and Israel. Admittedly, the economic, military and economic power of Israel is and has been stronger than that of the Palestinians by an order of magnitude. No united Palestinian leadership will remedy this. However, *without* an inclusive and legitimate Palestinian political leadership, any revived peace process will have slim chances for success.

Reconciling Hamas and Fatah – does it even matter?

Soon after the 2007 split, efforts were made to reconcile the belligerents. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen – among others – all tried to negotiate between Hamas and Fatah. These efforts failed, however, and it was not until the Arab Spring that an agreement between the two was signed. The fall of Mubarak in Egypt – whose regime traditionally favored Fatah – and the turmoil in Syria – whose regime overtly supports Hamas – rebalanced the playing field and allowed the warring parties to negotiate with less external interference. Popular demonstrations calling for an end to the split also pushed the two to find common ground, and as Fatah already had lost their patron and Hamas was in danger of losing theirs, there were strong incentives to end the split to ensure their political survival.



“Yes to reconciliation”
Photo: Frode Løvlie

Cautious optimism for a reunited Palestinian leadership followed the agreement between Hamas and Fatah signed in Cairo 27th April, but the implementation of the reconciliation agreement soon stalled. The mistrust and enmity between the factions run deep, and in particular issues related to security coordination, the interim government, and the reform of the PLO are difficult to solve. Even if the reconciliation efforts of Fatah and Hamas should succeed – and notwithstanding the likely international backlash against any Palestinian coalition with members from Hamas – the search for a reformed, legitimate and coherent Palestinian leadership will probably continue.

Because Hamas is listed as a terrorist organization by both the USA and the EU, the outcome of the elections led to an international boycott of the PNA. In a bid to end the boycott, a unity cabinet consisting of representatives from Hamas, Fatah, independents and technocrats replaced the first Hamas government in March 2007. Yet, the international boycott continued unabated, and after a tense period civil war broke out on the Gaza Strip. Hamas emerged victorious after a few days of bloody fighting, taking complete control in Gaza, whereas Fatah consolidated its rule of the West Bank. From then until the spring of 2011, Palestinian politics was deadlocked, marred by arbitrary imprisonment and torture of both real and alleged Fatah members by Hamas on the Gaza Strip and Hamas members and their sympathizers by Fatah on the West Bank.

For one, the two movements are at odds on fundamental strategic questions. Hamas remains committed to an active – and at times militant – resistance strategy against the Israeli occupation, whereas Fatah is the main proponent for a peaceful, negotiated solution. As these respective strategies are important sources of legitimacy for both, neither are likely to change. As such, a “successful” reconciliation would most likely result in an uneasy coalition between competing movements with fundamentally different and incompatible visions for Palestine.

Secondly, both movements seem convinced that they should rule the Palestinians alone: Fatah because it has been the leader of the PLO and the Palestinians since the late 1960s, and thus feels entitled to rule by default – despite having

largely stopped armed struggle, its traditional source of legitimacy; Hamas because it believes Islam to be the solution for all Palestinians' woes – a conviction that has been strengthened by interpreting the Arab Spring as the revival of political Islam – and because its sources of legitimacy are intact, including armed struggle, grassroots activities and elections. These positions are hardly conducive for cooperation and compromise, and thus bode ill for the survival of an eventual reconciliation.

Disillusionment and lack of alternatives

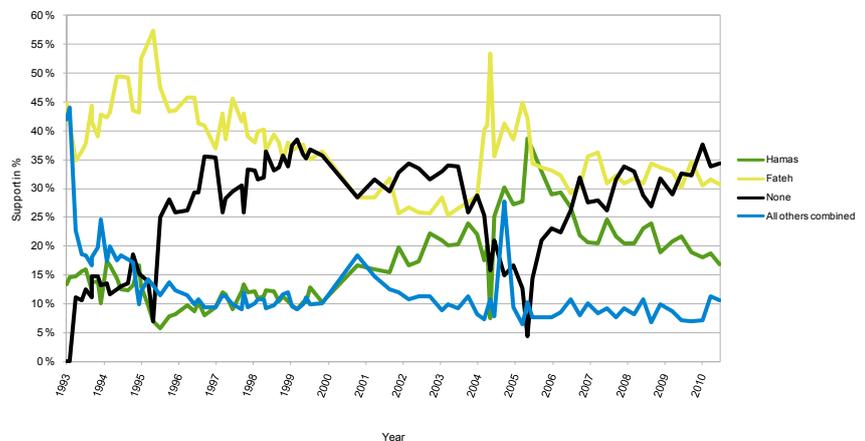
A third reason why reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah would be insufficient to alleviate the need for a legitimate and united Palestinian leadership, is the widespread disillusionment and apathy plaguing Palestinian politics (see Figure 1). The two are by far the largest parties in the occupied Palestinian territories, and combined enjoy the support of some 50 percent of the Palestinian electorate. At times, however, almost 40 percent of Palestinians have stated that they do not support or trust any party, and "none of the above" has consistently been the third most frequent answer since polling began in the early 1990s (CPRS 2000; PSR 2011). Such a high percentage of non-aligned, disillusioned voters call for a new political leadership – one able to mobilize and unite the Palestinians.

While election turnout has been higher than indicated by the polls (over 70 percent in 1996 and almost 80 percent in 2006 (CEC 2011)), the circumstances explaining this and the outcomes of these elections are now missing. Both in 1996 and 2006 Palestinians had the option to vote for a viable party untainted by office and failures. This is no longer the case.

In 1996, Fatah won in a landslide. Yassir Arafat, the leader of Fatah and Chairman of the PLO, had recently signed the Oslo Accords, which promised peace and a Palestinian state in the near future. The mood in the occupied territories was optimistic. In 2006, the atmosphere was anything but optimistic, and to everybody's surprise it was Hamas that won the elections. Many Palestinians voted for Hamas to punish Fatah for its failures; with the Oslo Accords in tatters, no peace and no Palestinian state, Fatah had simply not delivered on its promises. In addition, Yassir Arafat had passed away in 2004, leaving Fatah in a state of disarray. Hamas came to be seen as the only viable alternative, and its extensive social work, strong track-record as a resistance movement, and anti-corruption platform provided the movement with considerable legitimacy and support.

Today, both Fatah and Hamas are tainted by failures while in office. And, while the old leftist parties still exist and a range of parties were established in the 1990s, none of these are able to mobilize and unite the Palestinians. The leftists are too dogmatic to attract a large following, and the new parties

Figure 1: Factional support in Palestine, 1993 - 2011



(Source: CPRS (2000) and PSR (2011))

either lack grassroots support or function as vehicles for their leaders' personal ambitions. As a result, the Palestinians are left with no viable alternative leadership, bar the uneasy coalition of Hamas and Fatah if the reconciliation efforts eventually succeed. A major task for any Palestinian leadership is to rectify the political apathy and widespread disillusionment among the Palestinians, but the partisans in Hamas and Fatah are unlikely to achieve this even if they succeed in working together.

A somewhat bright future after all?

Despite the sorry state of Palestinian domestic politics, there are reasons to be hopeful for the emergence of a new, united, legitimate Palestinian leadership in the not too distant future.

For one, Palestinian factional politics has become increasingly independent from external interference. The current Palestinian factions' respective patrons – both on the regional and the international levels – have either ceased to exist (the Soviet Union for the leftist), are currently busy fighting for their own survival (Syria for Hamas), or have recently disappeared from the scene altogether (Mubarak in Egypt for Fatah). This is not to say that external interference has stopped altogether. For Fatah and the West Bank leadership, the international donor community is indispensable for both economic and political assistance, whereas Hamas continues to rely on Iran and other external sponsors for economic aid. However, and as the recent reconciliation efforts demonstrate, Palestinian politics is more independent than before in terms of direct meddling by external actors, forcing Palestinian leaders to become more responsive to popular demands. This might in turn allow for the establishment of new, more independent, Palestinian political movements.

Secondly, the Arab Spring has altered the political landscape in the region dramatically. Though the consequences for the Palestinians remain unclear, it is all but certain that the recent developments will have ramifications for the

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Palestinian domestic political scene as well. That the protests in Egypt and Tunisia have inspired Palestinians is but one, early sign of things to come, even if the tragic developments in Yemen and Syria, and the bloody war in Libya have left the Palestinians with fear and apprehension.

Thirdly, the Palestinians have recently proven their ability for popular, non-factional, mass-mobilization. The signing of the reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah came about partly because independents, youths, and non-aligned Palestinians managed to coordinate mass-protests throughout the occupied territories. Importantly, these protests were also independent of existing factions. Outside the occupied territories, Palestinian refugees have also adopted the popular, non-violent protests as their method of choice – largely inspired by the recent successes of the Egyptian people.

Concluding remarks

It is clear that the Palestinians are in need of a united, legitimate political leadership if a revived peace process is to have any chance of success. It is equally clear that any coalition of Hamas, Fatah or the other existing factions will be unable to deliver this. Their legitimacy is simply too frayed. There are nevertheless reasons to remain hopeful that the factionalism, infighting and widespread disillusionment plaguing Palestinian politics might be alleviated. Already there are indications that the Egyptian experience is inspiring Palestinians to build a united and mass-based political movement. Such a movement might be able to either produce a new and legitimate Palestinian leadership, or force the current leadership to undergo real reform.

Recommended reading

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