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Gaza reconciliation: Burying the hatchet or changing stripes?

After a decade of intra-Palestinian strife, rival factions Fatah and Hamas realised the need for a political compromise. The signature of the reconciliation agreement indicates the adaptability of Hamas's survival strategy and Fatah's quest for renewed legitimacy. Yet its implementation remains uncertain.

Ten years after its coup in Gaza, Islamist Hamas signalled its readiness to advance an intra-Palestinian reconciliation with secular Fatah, amidst deep economic recession and a humanitarian crisis. Compared to other clandestine Islamists, who became visible players during the Arab spring, the Palestinian Hamas has been an important political actor since its election victory in 2006. Ever since the Israeli withdrawal in 2005, Gaza has practically been under siege, a blockade intensified following the forceful takeover of the city-state in June 2007.

Currently, the dire circumstances have pushed Hamas to engage with its rival Fatah, which also faces decreasing popularity in the Palestinian polity. A deep economic recession in Gaza (massive unemployment coupled with lack of mobility) compounded by the humanitarian situation (depletion of fresh water resources, limited electricity provision and basic health services) led Hamas to the negotiation table.

As a result, representatives of the rival movements signed a reconciliation agreement in Cairo on 12 October. Instrumental in the preparations on behalf of Fatah has been Mohammed Dahlan, the former security chief in Gaza, whereas Yahya Sinwar, previously a leader in the Qassam brigades, represented

Hamas. Both grew up in Gaza's Khan Younis refugee camp.

The agreement, which is supposed to tackle institutional and security issues, represents the seventh attempt at reconciliation within a decade. It aims at unifying the geographically separate administrative bodies under the umbrella of the Palestinian Authority (PA). This includes the reinsertion of roughly 40,000 civil servants hired by Hamas, as well as control of the border crossings by the PA's official security agents. The purpose of the agreement is to reunite the Palestinian political leadership and ultimately provide it with a public mandate through elections. However, previous agreements with similar objectives have not come to fruition on this sticking point.

Even though both parties to the conflict have been coerced into the negotiations by local circumstances and external actors, a number of personnel and ideological decisions prepared the ground. In February, Yahya Sinwar was appointed the new Hamas leader of Gaza, whereas the former PM Ismail Haniyeh replaced Khaled Meshaal, head of the Political Bureau, its central policy-making body. Furthermore, in May, Hamas introduced a revision of its charter by dropping any direct reference to the Muslim Brotherhood. These

symbolic, seemingly pragmatist measures seem to be due to Egypt's repressive measures against the movement, ever since the armed forces wrested power from it in 2013 and its role in the blockade of the Rafah crossing.

On the other side, changes within Fatah have introduced a new dynamic. PA President Mahmoud Abbas's popularity has slumped to a historical low, with more than 50% demanding his resignation. His internal rival, Dahlan, made a forceful comeback from exile in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), mediating between his own faction, Hamas and Egypt. He also managed to work on local-level reconciliation bolstered by substantial financial support from the Emirates. Despite his progress inside Gaza, and his visible role in the Cairo negotiations, President Abbas rejects any future political role for Dahlan, due to their unresolved differences.

Since the Hamas-Fatah rapprochement started in summer 2017, Cairo's General Intelligence Service has offered its good offices to help broker the latest agreement. Its parameters basically refer to the 2011 Cairo Agreement, an earlier version of the intra-factional entente. Its main objective then was the formation of an interim government in preparation for the election of a

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Both authors served as diplomats in Palestine during the Hamas election victory in 2006 and the ensuing phase of inter-factional conflict.

new PA government. Nevertheless, the 2011 agreement was not implemented due to profound differences. Nonetheless, the PA set up a technocratic National Unity Government led by PM Rami Hamdallah in 2014.

Egypt's motivation is linked to establishing stability in Sinai and being perceived as a regional power broker. Cairo's efforts to quell the ongoing jihadist insurgency in Sinai could be supported by stable governance in Gaza, the reason why cooperation with Hamas is considered to be of added value in order to pre-empt increasing jihadist activity in the Gaza strip. At the same time, Cairo considers the current regional setting an opportunity to push back Qatari and Turkish influence, both essential Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood supporters. As the UAE share the terrorist designation of the Brotherhood with Cairo, they view empowering Dahlan as a chance to extend their regional influence by weakening Hamas's grip on power.

The very fact that the two arch-enemies, Azzam al-Ahmed (Fatah) and Saleh al-Aroui (Hamas), signed the agreement indicates that the situation has become ripe for a deal at the intra-Palestinian level. Hardship and pressure pushed the parties to pragmatism. Hamas has been able to adapt to changing circumstances,

learning from the experiences of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, in order to guarantee its own survival. Fatah, on the other hand, regards the agreement as an opportunity to regain political credibility and legitimacy. Yet even if fulfillment of the agreement duly appears obvious, fundamental differences could make its practical implementation, as hitherto, difficult.

Furthermore, it is also in Israel's interests to see its South-Western flank more settled. Hence, the agreement is conducive to its own security, since its implementation would put the security forces in Gaza under central PA command, ideally preventing a renewed military confrontation. However, as Israeli intransigence continues to face Palestinian irredentism, the prospects for a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict currently remain doubtful.