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A Discussion at INSS on Hamas-Fatah Reconciliation Efforts

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The Palestinian system has been going through a process of critical reassessment for several months. There have been some attempts at rapprochement between the two principal camps – Fatah on the one hand, and Hamas and the other factions on the other. The most recent catalyst behind such efforts was the normalization agreement between Israel and the UAE, which was interpreted as a withdrawal of the Arab support for the strategy underlying the Palestinians’ national struggle against Israel. In turn, the Palestinian camps are trying to promote internal understandings and agreement toward an updated strategy for the struggle. This is an unprecedented development in Palestinian national history. At a meeting in Istanbul on September 24, 2020 between the senior members of both camps, it was clear how seriously they view the developments that distance the Palestinian issue from the top of the regional agenda. That same day, INSS held a discussion on two approaches that assess the prospects for reconciliation between the Palestinian camps. This article analyzes these approaches, while considering the significance for Israel of the strategic assessment process currently underway in the Palestinian theater.

The meeting in Istanbul on September 24, 2020 between Fatah and Hamas, represented, respectively, by Fatah General Secretary Jibril Rajoub and Saleh al-Arouri, reflects the seriousness with which the leaders of the two Palestinian camps view the developments that have pushed the Palestinian issue from the top of the regional agenda. The release of President Trump’s plan for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement in January 2020; the intention announced by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to annex parts of the West Bank; and the normalization accords between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain (a development that has effectively postponed the annexation) are perceived by the Palestinians as a threat to both the future of their national project and their exclusive representation of the cause. The refusal by foreign ministers at the Arab League summit on September 9 to condemn the Abraham Accords for their deviation from the principles of the Arab Peace Initiative reinforced this view.

The meeting in Istanbul was another in a series of efforts by rival Palestinian camps to promote reconciliation through a joint struggle – or at least to lend the appearance of unity. In early August there was a joint press conference with Rajoub (in Ramallah) and al-Arouri (in Beirut), and on September 3 there was a meeting – the first of its kind – led by PA

President Abu Mazen, attended by the heads of all the Palestinian factions, including Islamic Jihad.

At the conclusion of the Istanbul meeting, both parties, in language expressing rapprochement and a willingness to work together, agreed to draw up a joint plan for dealing with the challenges currently facing the Palestinian national movement. Understandings were reached regarding elections to Palestinian institutions, although the final document still requires the approval of all the organizations. Rajoub stated there was no agreement regarding a meeting of general secretaries, since Hamas was still studying the proposed outline. He also noted that Fatah and Hamas had agreed to proceed along two channels – bilateral and national, i.e., a broad framework involving all factions that accepted the proposal. On October 1 the Fatah Central Committee approved the outline presented by Rajoub.

On September 24, INSS held a discussion of two approaches regarding the prospects for reconciliation between the Palestinian rival camps.

Yohanan Tzoreff presented the approach that identifies a change that could lead to unity, whereby the regional and international isolation of the Palestinians forces them to update their national plan. Neither Fatah nor Hamas alone can implement its strategy for the national liberation struggle, and they must therefore rethink the situation: they must look inward, without Arab or other external mediation, and PA President Abu Mazen must change his attitude on the rivalry between the organizations, which until now has been the main obstacle to relations with Hamas.

Kobi Michael presented the approach that considers the wide gaps between the organizations as unbridgeable, and assessed the chances of Fatah-Hamas reconciliation as low to non-existent. This is a zero-sum game against a background of rivalry for Palestinian leadership, and the fact that Hamas is supported by external players – Turkey and Qatar, who are the main supporters of the political Islam axis, and have an agenda that goes beyond the Palestinian agenda and is linked to the struggle for regional hegemony.

Rapprochement

The friction with Israel is almost the only element that has shaped relations between Fatah and Hamas, the two largest Palestinian organizations, since 1987. This friction is what divided them, and in the current circumstances it could help draw them closer. Palestinian independence was announced at a meeting of the Palestinian National Council on November 15, 1988, and this later enabled the formulation of the Oslo Accords and the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan. Now, however, this friction threatens to damage the political achievements of the Palestinian national movement (there have been previous setbacks, but not to the extent represented by the Trump plan and later the normalization between Israel and the Gulf states).

President Trump's proposal led to a unified response from the Palestinian camps, since it failed to include even the minimum demands of the most moderate faction in the Palestinian arena. It was perceived as Israeli annexation of all the land between the river and the sea, particularly since security responsibility for the entire area and sovereignty over the holy sites in East Jerusalem would remain in Israeli hands, even after the establishment of a Palestinian state. Moreover, the normalization agreement between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain made it clear to the Palestinians that the Israeli intention to annex areas of the West Bank was suspended, but not canceled. It also illustrated the depth of their isolation and the loss of Arab solidarity, which was the basis for the strategy of their struggle against Israel and negotiations with Israel.

The feeling that now dominates the Palestinian arena is that the two camps must turn inward and formulate a joint plan of action, as a response to weakness. Both main camps, Fatah and Hamas, are making attempts to draw closer in response to public demand, which sees the split between them as the main reason for Palestinian weakness, enabling external elements to intervene. This understanding is shared by all the factions, and they have displayed a willingness to enlist in the efforts. However, it is not clear how far the camps can adapt their basic positions and their respective interests in order to act together. The different strategies adopted by Fatah and Hamas for the struggle against Israel, the deep rivalries between the leaderships, and the resentment they have caused all challenge their ability to reconcile. Three issues could possibly be the main stumbling blocks:

- a. *Armed resistance and the use of weapons*: Upon his election to the Palestinian Authority in 2005, Abu Mazen ordered a stop to all violent activity against Israel, and announced the start of a new era: "one authority, one law, one gun," and full security coordination with Israel, which was often defined as sacred. The Hamas takeover in the Gaza Strip in 2007 created a separation between the two Palestinian areas, which was reinforced by the security cooperation and the calm that remained in the West Bank. Abu Mazen asked for Palestinian Authority control of weapons in the Palestinian arena as a condition for reconciliation with Hamas, but Hamas rejected this and adhered to armed opposition as its main path. However, over the years, particularly following rounds of fighting with Israel, it has slightly softened its approach. In 2017, Hamas published a new political manifesto, which stated that it could agree with Fatah on non-violent actions against Israel, although not necessarily as part of full reconciliation. In its manifesto, Hamas clarified that it would be prepared to put the use of arms under the responsibility of a joint national entity, which would determine the nature of the resistance and when the use of arms would be permitted.
- b. *Balance of power between the organizations*: The general assessment in Israel is that Hamas is a strong and coherent entity, with a defined ideology that does not recognize Israel's right to exist, and a belief in the justice of its cause. For their part, the Palestinians see resistance as the peak of sacrifice and a way of releasing feelings of rage and revenge, but they do not believe that this will promote liberty

and affect Israel's basic positions, or even further any strategic objective. The evidence for this is the considerable decline in armed resistance from the Gaza Strip since 2014. Hamas is well aware that its continued rule of the Strip is the result of an Israeli decision not to reoccupy the area, and that the imbalance of power with Israel is massive. At the same time, the claim often made by Hamas spokespeople with reference to Israeli deterrence is in fact the outcome of public Israeli discourse, which reinforces it. It is therefore now difficult to talk of relations between Fatah and Hamas as a zero sum game. However, Hamas is more aware than in the past of the need for joint action and integration in the international community. Even if Hamas takes control of the PLO, it will have to deal with more complex issues than the difficulties it currently faces in the Gaza Strip. Can it ignore the Israeli presence in the West Bank and gain political support or material aid from a European country without changing its attitude to the conflict and its desired solution? Will Fatah remain central to the PLO if Hamas takes control? Or will Hamas join the PLO to the radical regional axis, and thus risk constant conflict with Israel and with a significant part of the Palestinian people, which sees any link to the radical axis as illegitimate?

- c. *Joining the Turkish-Qatari axis:* The moves so far by Hamas and Fatah bring them closer to the Turkish-Qatari axis. Such a connection could have serious implications for Fatah, even though it has proper ties with Qatar and it has no problematic issues with Turkey. But by becoming closer to this axis, Fatah would have to retreat from the more pragmatic, national camp, which is less Islamic and to which it has always belonged. Therefore, such a move should be seen more as a protest against the Arab states that support normalization with Israel, and less as an attempt to withdraw from the pragmatic camp. Indeed, after the meeting in Istanbul, senior Fatah members Jibril Rajoub and Rouhi Fatuh went first to Doha and from there to Cairo, after Egypt expressed its disappointment at the attempt to exclude it from the internal Palestinian dialogue. Their purpose was to explain that Egypt's role in the dialogue was secure, but that this was an internal Palestinian initiative. In any event, it appears that Fatah will not sever its links with the pragmatic camp, and Hamas has been making efforts to draw closer to this camp for some time, although without success. Moreover there are already signs of foot-dragging on the part of the forums that are supposed to meet and approve the continuation of the reconciliation process, and some Palestinians believe they are waiting for the results of the US presidential elections. Abu Mazen hopes that Biden will be elected and will distance himself from Trump's moves – which could make the reconciliation process superfluous.

Unbridgeable Gaps

The Palestinian system is facing one of the lowest moments in its history. The Palestinians have lost both their veto of the years of the Oslo process regarding normalization between Israel and the Arab world, and the ability to influence US policy toward the conflict and its possible solutions, as well as US financial support. They are in a deep economic crisis; they have lost the support of the pragmatic Arab camp and are left with the support of the

radical camp, led by Turkey, Qatar, and Iran; and there is dramatic erosion of public trust in the PA leadership. All this has occurred while the Palestinian arena is split between two independent and competing entities, representing different world views and strategies for action.

The Fatah and Hamas leaderships sense that this is an emergency, but their distress is different. As Hamas sees it, the decline in the status of the Palestinian issue and the Palestinian system itself is ultimate proof of the failure of the negotiating strategy led by Abu Mazen, and of the correctness of its approach – continuation of the armed struggle against Israel. From this the Hamas leadership derives that now is the time to remove the historic hegemony of Fatah and leverage this development to realize the organization's strategic purpose of taking control of the Palestinian system.

The Hamas leadership, headed by Ismail Haniyeh and Saleh al-Arouri – political rivals themselves – prioritizes closeness to the Turkish-Qatari axis and to Iran and is prepared to promote reconciliation with Fatah, but naturally on its own terms. However, their agenda does not match that of Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip, who prefers to rely on Egypt. Sinwar focuses on the local aspect; he seeks to improve the humanitarian reality in the Gaza Strip and strengthen the Hamas hold of the region as a long term sovereign element, and his interest in events in the West Bank is limited. The agenda of Haniyeh and al-Arouri is far broader.

For the Hamas leadership, the willingness to promote reconciliation with Fatah is a springboard to promotion of their strategic purpose – assuming control of the Palestinian system. It believes that for Fatah, reconciliation is simply a platform for maintaining a grip on control; for Hamas, reconciliation is possible only if it is a partner in the loci of power in the Palestinian system. This is the basis for its demand to hold immediate elections for the PA presidency, the Palestinian Legislative Council, and the Palestinian National Council; the goal is the entry of Hamas into the PLO framework and proper representation in its institutions. These demands were and still are a knife at the throat of Fatah and the PA leadership. Fatah for its part wants to have elections in stages (in the past it demanded subordination of the Hamas military force to the Palestinian Authority, and it is not clear whether this demand remains). Fatah and the PA oppose the formation of a unity government in order to prepare the elections and both demand that the serving government should be responsible for all necessary preparations.

The Hamas leadership is convinced that in simultaneous elections to the Palestinian presidency, the Legislative Council, and the National Council, the organization will make significant gains and may even defeat Fatah and win control of the whole system. Free and supervised elections leading to a legitimate Hamas victory will solidify its status at home and in the eyes of the leadership, and force the international community to recognize the organization, enabling it to break out of its current international isolation.

Even if they wish to integrate into the PLO, it is not likely that the Hamas leadership (Haniyeh and al-Arouri) can compel the power elements in the Gaza Strip to renounce their military assets, as these are their insurance policy and the foundation of Hamas rule in the Strip. Furthermore, despite the 2017 manifesto issued under previous Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, Hamas denies the logic that guided the Oslo Accords – the political process with Israel, and contrary to the PA, supports the armed struggle over a peaceful popular struggle. The military infrastructure is not only essential to the existence of Hamas, but also a means for realizing its strategy and establishing its claim for recognition as the leader of the armed struggle. The most the Hamas leadership can agree to at the moment is to enable the Palestinian Authority to return to Gaza and accept civilian management of the area. But this compromise could turn out to be a slippery slope leading the Palestinian arena to a “Lebanese reality,” something that Abu Mazen dreads, and is therefore not likely to accept.

Hamas is operating in a dialectic reality – indirect contacts with Israel together with non-recognition of Israel’s legitimacy and a continuation of the armed struggle. In the eyes of the organization, this is a historic struggle that will not be decided in this generation, and demands perseverance and determination until the final victory, even if there are some compromises along the way. Current contacts with Fatah over possible reconciliation can be explained as an expression of this approach.

Conclusion and Significance for Israel

In spite of the unsteady strategic situation of the Palestinian system, it is still too early to determine whether the response to the challenge will be a re-organization based on relations between Fatah and Hamas. Fatah’s foundation of legitimacy and source of strength, through the Palestinian Authority, and above all, its vision – an independent Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders with its capital in East Jerusalem, as negotiated in talks with Israel based on the Arab Peace Initiative and relevant international resolutions – have sustained severe blows from the United States and Arab countries.

On the other hand, the Hamas leadership sees this crisis as an opportunity to strengthen the organization’s status, necessarily at the expense of Fatah and the PA. Hamas is aware of the weakness of a non-united struggle, but its situation is easier than Fatah’s. In view of its rival’s weakness, it has no interest in becoming more flexible. This means fewer chances of reconciliation between the two camps. Nevertheless the Palestinian system will necessarily change if Abu Mazen retires from public life, or alternatively, chooses to partner with Hamas in order to formulate a joint strategy that will increase the weight of the Palestinian card in the regional and international arenas, and specifically vis-à-vis Israel. At the moment he is buying time, hoping that the results of the US election will replace President Trump, the enemy of Palestinian interests. Abu Mazen still prefers the political route with Israel to reconciliation with Hamas, which will pave the way for an organization in competition for presidency of the Palestinian Authority and the PLO. A development in this direction is contrary to Israeli interests.

Israel for its part wishes to maintain a stable and functioning PA, on which it can base security and civilian coordination, ensure a better and more stable economic reality in the West Bank, and promote security calm in the Gaza Strip by means of effective Hamas rule and military restraint. Some in Israel believe that it is possible to block the slim possibility that Fatah and Hamas will reach an arrangement and division of powers, by incorporating the PA into the normalization accords between Israel and the Gulf states, and by taking the Trump plan off the agenda. This could significantly improve the PA's political and economic situation, but since the return of the PA to government in the Gaza Strip is very unlikely and there is no way to bring it back to the negotiating table as long as the Trump plan remains on the agenda, Israel must come up with new political proposals and/or continue to treat the West Bank and the Gaza Strip differently, for as long as this is possible or relevant.

In this framework, Israel would do well to try to renew the security, economic, and civilian coordination with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and block Hamas entrenchment in the area. At the same time it must act to improve and stabilize the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, while also improving and stabilizing the security situation through willingness to achieve a broader and more significant arrangement with the relevant sources of power in the Strip. Security calm will also facilitate a practical discussion on the renewal of talks between Israel and the PA, with the backing of the UAE, based on an amended Trump plan that responds to both Palestinian demands and Israeli expectations, and based on the Arab initiative. Although the chances of a permanent settlement seem low at present, a renewal of the political process would enable renewal of security and civilian coordination, improve the existing security and economic situation, and perhaps even allow the parties to reach more limited agreements that meet at least some of the demands and expectations. Renewal of the political process will strengthen the PA and make it harder for Hamas and Fatah to join ranks and formulate a joint belligerent strategy against Israel, which is inherently contrary to the aim of a negotiated solution to the conflict.