

**Possible Rapprochement between Fatah and Hamas: Is Israel Ready?**

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**At a time that the Palestinian issue appears increasingly sidelined on the Israeli agenda, current efforts at rapprochement between Fatah and Hamas are particularly noteworthy. These efforts accelerated following the "deal of the century" presented by President Trump; Israel's intention to annex portions of the West Bank; and the normalization accords between some Gulf states and Israel. The agreement of the two organizations on elections for Palestinian Authority institutions, along with a prevalent sense in the Palestinian arena of coordination between Fatah and Hamas, strengthens the supposition that the current attempt is more serious attempt than previous efforts. However, Israel and the United States have so far displayed little interest in this development. Is Israel ready for the possibility that the results of the elections could provide Hamas with a foothold and even leadership of the PA institutions, as occurred in the elections held in 2006, when Hamas garnered a victory? Coordinated action is needed between Israel and the United States, European countries, and even Arab countries, first of all given the need to repair Fatah's fundamental situation; this must also include a reaffirmation that there has been no change in the Quartet's demands of Hamas regarding any potential dialogue. In other words, any Palestinian government must be required to recognize Israel and the agreements signed with it, and renounce terrorism.**

It seems that the Palestinian issue has long lost its central position on the Israeli political agenda. At times Israel's attention is aroused, for example, when Hamas did not back Islamic Jihad when it tried to provoke a conflict with Israel in November 2019, or recently, when the possibility arose of deposing Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip. Yet even the announcement by Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas in January 2021 on the intention to hold general elections for the Palestinian institutions – the presidency, the National Council, and the Legislative Council – has not noticeably stirred Israel, despite the far-reaching potential consequences of their results. The ongoing disconnect between the political leadership in Israel and the Palestinian Authority continues to deepen, and not only due to the recurring elections and political impasse in Israel.

Concomitantly, there have been recent attempts at rapprochement between Fatah and Hamas, the two organizations that represent the poles of the divided Palestinian system. These attempts differ from previous, failed efforts due to new political circumstances that have emerged following the "deal of the century" presented by President Trump; the normalizations agreements signed between Israel and some Gulf states; Israel's intention to annex parts of the West Bank, which did not materialize due to these agreements; the COVID-19 crisis; the severe economic depression in the Palestinian territories; and the significant regression in the Palestinians' regional and international standing. Currently, and unlike in the past, there is a respectful discourse between the two organizations, without mutual accusations, condemnations, and recriminations. This behavior by Fatah and Hamas also influences the other Palestinian factions, which are cooperating with the two and hoping for progress toward national reconciliation.

Part of the background to these attempts is the ongoing erosion of Hamas's public standing following the military conflicts with Israel since the coup in Gaza in 2007, which caused great destruction in Gaza, and its failure in the management of the daily lives of the local population, especially following the conflict with Israel in 2014 (Operation Protective Edge). Since then, out of an understanding that Gaza's residents will not be able to withstand another conflict, and the understanding that as long as there is security coordination between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, it will not be possible to transfer the arena of conflict with Israel to the West Bank, the Hamas leadership has attempted to diversify its struggle against Israel, preferring popular protest over armed conflict. This diversity is accompanied by thinking about updating the organization's objectives and aims, albeit while ensuring that its "resistance" character is maintained. This and the assessment that Fatah or Hamas alone will not be able to revive the Palestinian issue and reverse the regression in its standing led to the conclusion that it is necessary to strive for national reconciliation. Thus, towards the end of Trump's presidency, all of the Palestinian factions convened, for the first time out of independent Palestinian initiative, and agreed to work to advance inter-organizational unity.

Once Hamas accepted Abbas's demand and withdrew its insistence to hold the elections for the three Palestinian institutions on a single date, the PA chairman had no choice but to announce the elections, which sets a six-month timeline for their preparation and implementation, starting in May 2021. Issuing the order inspired a dynamic of renewal in the Palestinian public arena and hope for reconciliation is evident, including among many young people, as well as an expectation of a change in the leadership and a desire to participate in the process. While the baggage of the past still hovers in the background – the lack of confidence in the leaderships of the organizations, the concern of exploiting the weakness of the divided Fatah, and the bloody conflicts that characterized the relations between these organizations in the past – the new public dynamic has sparked a

process that will be harder to arrest as time goes on. Furthermore, the lack of a Hamas response to controversial orders issued by Abbas, including regarding eligibility for candidacy, creates the impression that these orders have been coordinated with Hamas. Difficulties in the eyes of the Palestinian organizations that Israel could create regarding holding the elections in East Jerusalem and in other places, in order to disrupt the elections and even prevent them, have not deterred the organizations. Inter alia, it was reported that Abbas rejected, with some impatience, the concern about holding the elections expressed to him by the head of the Shin Bet on his visit to the Mukata'a.

Thus, the idea of Fatah and Hamas running together in a joint or united list, despite the considerable resistance that it arouses, is on the agenda. According to critics, such a list would create a reality of managing the division, not of reconciliation, and even if it brings the organizations closer together, in effect it will divide the centers of power between them, ignore the rest of the organizations, and will not allow space for other ideas and voices. Still, figures close to Abbas and senior Hamas officials continue to discuss this possibility.

Hamas, which currently aspires to be a partner in government and not to lead it, has expressed ostensibly greater interest than Fatah in the idea of a joint list. Such a list, if it is created, would ensure that Hamas not face Arab and international forces alone and their subsequent ostracism, as in 2006. Fatah, for its part, which leads the PLO, will stand at the front and demand legitimacy for the new, joint government, as it received legitimacy for its government in the past. In the ranks of Hamas the prevailing assessment is that the cost of the concessions that the organization will have to make in order to take part in a joint government will be lower than those inherent in acceding to the Quarter's demands, posed following its victory in the 2006 elections. The path to holding the elections to the Palestinian National Council, which are planned for September 2021, could also be paved in this way, along with the entry of Hamas and Islamic Jihad into the PLO framework.

The Israeli government has thus far refrained from dealing intensively with the issue of the planned elections to the Palestinian Authority institutions. At the same time, visits and arrests carried out by IDF forces on Hamas operatives and opposition figures in the PA territories, in order to warn them against participation in the elections, have been reported recently in the Palestinian press. These arrests may make it more difficult to hold the elections, but they could actually accelerate the process of inter-organizational rapprochement. The Biden administration has also not yet presented a position on this issue, and has taken insignificant steps such as renewing US contributions to UNRWA that do not bespeak a change in the administration's position from that of the Trump administration regarding the Israeli-Palestinian issue. It should be noted, however, that

before and after the US presidential elections, Biden's representatives made clear that he intends to restore the relationship with the Palestinians. The inter-organizational rapprochement attempts also reflect the insight that has taken shape among Abbas's associates that the Biden administration is not to be expected to pressure the Israeli government to renew political negotiations or to change its position, which in the eyes of the Palestinian Authority does not aspire to an agreement. Hence follows the conclusion that it is necessary to mobilize with a united front that will stop the erosion in the standing of the Palestinian issue and also set rules of the game that narrow the existing asymmetry between the Palestinians and Israel.

The lack of a response to recent developments from the Israeli government and the US administration raises questions, especially given the weakness of Fatah under Mahmoud Abbas. The wave of people leaving the organization, as well as the removal of senior figures and the intention of those who have left to run in the elections on a number of separate lists, shows the depth of the crisis in the ranks of the organization. In contrast, Hamas has recently demonstrated organizational unity, despite the internal disagreements, and full mobilization behind Yahya Sinwar, who was re-elected – albeit not without an intra-organizational controversy – as head of Hamas in the Gaza Strip. This unity is a significant advantage that improves Hamas's chances of winning in the elections, as in the 2006 elections, and strengthens Hamas's position in the rapprochement process with Fatah toward regulating inter-organizational relations.

And indeed, given the talks between the organizations, there is a greater likelihood than in the past of coming to an inter-organizational agreement regarding not a reconciliation government, but rather, a joint government. In the framework of such a joint government, the territorial control of each side is expected to be maintained, Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza, operating in coordination and cooperation. However, it is still possible to influence the direction and level of fulfillment of this possibility.

Israel should coordinate positions with the United States and other relevant actors in the international arena that have not yet publicly expressed their position on these developments in the Palestinian camp. It should be made clear to Abbas that there will be no change in the position of the Quartet regarding Hamas, unless that organization accedes to the demands placed on it, changes its position, and recognizes Israel and the agreements signed with it. It is also necessary to convey to Abbas the concern, which is shared by all of the relevant actors, including countries in the Middle East, about the deep internal crisis besetting the Fatah organization, and the urgent need for reorganization of its ranks – before elections are held. In addition, Israel should initiate a renewed process of dialogue with the Palestinians, preferably with US, international, and inter-Arab

coordination, to discuss restoring relations, building confidence, and agreeing on a plan for renewing the political process.

Furthermore, Israel should prepare for the eventuality whereby the separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip stops being a central feature of the Palestinian system, and Ramallah and Gaza foster coordination of protest activities along the borders with Israel and at points of friction, in the West Bank and in the international arena.

It is still too early to tell whether the rapprochement process between Fatah and Hamas reflects tactical measures on the part of the two organizations, which do not change the balance of power between them in Hamas's favor, or whether this is the beginning of a historic change with strategic implications for Israel. Either way, it is recommended that Israel on the one hand refrain from actions that would be seen as hindering the rapprochement process, but on the other hand, insist on its security interests, while demanding that the international community adhere to the established criteria regarding dialogue with Hamas.