



***INSS Insight*** No. 548, May 14, 2014

## **The Palestinian Reconciliation Agreement: Tactical Relief or Strategic Opportunity?**

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The reconciliation agreement reached recently by Fatah and Hamas is, in essence, similar to previous agreements between the two organizations (Mecca in 2007, Cairo in 2011, and the 2012 Doha declaration) and includes an agreement to establish a joint national government of technocrats, headed by President Abbas, and hold parliamentary and presidential elections in the Palestinian Authority. The understandings that were formulated postponed the discussion of security, especially the future of the military wing of Hamas and its capabilities. This issue will be handled by a security committee to be convened only after the establishment of a unity government, which means a continuation of the status quo, i.e., separate management of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The agreement neither mentions any binding dates for completing the discussions on the unity government nor stipulates a date for elections once the government is formed.

An analysis of the Palestinian reconciliation agreement must consider both what is not included and what is covered. Yet despite its brevity – the agreement refers to two issues only – and despite the importance of what is not included, which may prove to be the stumbling blocks when it comes to implementation of the agreement, it is important to assess the significance of the agreement's validity specifically at this point in time.

The agreement is a result of the internal weakness of both organizations, with each suffering a steady erosion of legitimacy and public support. In this sense, the domestic policy of both Palestinian groups is what dictated the move. Hamas finds itself at an all-time low because of its conflict with the current Egyptian regime after the downfall of its patron, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The ongoing economic crisis in the Gaza Strip due to the closure of the tunnels and the tight Egyptian blockade has aggravated Hamas's loss of public support. Abbas too has lost the support of the Palestinian public given the lack of faith in his political direction. His legitimacy is lowest among his constituency, especially the younger generation of Fatah, which has tired of him and the leadership in general. At the same time, Abbas is driven by the sense that he might be defamed as having split the Palestinian camp.

If the agreement is in fact the result of internal issues and is meant to expand Abbas's base of legitimacy, it is important to clarify the type of legitimacy involved and its foreign policy implications. Is the legitimacy of a kind that would expand Abbas's room for political maneuvering vis-à-vis Israel? Would it give him the flexibility to make significant compromises? Presenting Abbas's effort as an inevitable last resort to expand his internal legitimacy base means support – even if inadvertent – for incitement and the ethos of struggle and resistance. The discourse of hatred in the Palestinian public reduces Abbas's political room for maneuvering and represents a millstone around his neck, no matter how pragmatic he may be.

It appears that both Palestinian parties understand the potential for the agreement's collapse due to the huge gaps between them and the deep conceptual divide between Hamas's pan-Islamic religious ideology and Fatah's nationalistic ideology. The agreement does not change Hamas's essence as a terrorist organization and does nothing to make the Palestinian Authority or the PLO or Abbas into authorized representatives of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. The current interim stage, which grants Abbas renewed legitimacy, is the most difficult one for Hamas. Perhaps for this reason, Fatah and Abbas are dragging their feet and postponing the establishment of a government in an attempt to hold Hamas in this interim state for as long as possible.

The government of technocrats is a mechanism meant to make a show of both sides living under the same roof without either one having to give up its fundamental ideology. However, the proposed mechanism is liable to emerge as problematic and dangerous, given the inherent potential for Lebanonization. Hamas, like Hizbollah in Lebanon, would be able to be part of the governmental mechanism and a partner in the government while preserving its military capabilities (Hamas leaders in Gaza have already made that point) and military freedom of action in order to serve what it considers to be essential strategic interests. Any international acceptance of this hybrid union that relies on hopes of Hamas becoming more moderate in the future means the start of an intolerable situation for Israel. Any attempt to single out the Palestinian case from all others in the region is a kind of wishful thinking that ignores the depths of the religious ideology in Hamas's worldview.

If and when the reality of the reconciliation agreement comes into being, Israel is liable to find itself facing an even more complex problem vis-à-vis the Gaza Strip. How exactly will Israel act towards Abbas who, by virtue of the agreement, becomes responsible for whatever happens in Gaza, including rocket fire at Israel? Will Israel have to moderate its response because the international community will say that too harsh a response is liable to damage the Palestinian Authority and the fragile unity? How will Israel be able to conduct political negotiations with Abbas and at the same time tackle terrorism and terrorist infrastructures in the Gaza Strip and possibly in the West Bank as well? Moreover, how exactly does one explain the oxymoron of the inclusion of a terrorist

organization opposed to the Oslo Accords in the PA, established by virtue of those very accords?

It seems that Abbas intends to present his government of technocrats as one that accepts the three conditions presented by the Quartet – renunciation of terrorism and violence, recognition of previous agreements, and recognition of the State of Israel – alongside the agreement to conduct political talks with Israel but without challenging Hamas. Thus Abbas expects to expand his toolbox and present himself as the representative of all the Palestinian people, giving him the extra gravitas and validity that he needs when he appeals to the international community both for support in his challenge to Israel and for broad recognition of a Palestinian state.

Although the reconciliation will likely not last, because Hamas will not cede its control of the Gaza Strip and will not disarm its military wing, and therefore Abbas's vision of "one authority – one weapon" will not come to pass, Israel must be unequivocal in its demand that Hamas accept the conditions stipulated by the Quartet. Any whitewash or blind eye is tantamount to sowing the seeds of destruction, weakening the international community's definition of Hamas as a terrorist organization. Israel might then have to confront a reality in which it is accused of undermining the Palestinian reconciliation whenever it is forced to act against the Gaza Strip because of rocket terrorism.

### **A Different Approach: Necessary Conditions to Make the Reconciliation an Opportunity**

Should a Palestinian unity government of technocrats be established, one option open to Israel is a transition from a discourse of opposition to the reconciliation, to an attempt to restart the political process but with an essential difference in the format of the process. This would entail moving away from a discussion of the permanent status agreement core issues, where the gaps cannot be bridged any time soon, to a gradual construction of a two-state reality by helping the Palestinians build a responsible, stable, and functioning political entity. In doing so, Israel would be able to demand responsibility on the part of the PA, and especially Abbas, for the Gaza Strip and propose turning the Gaza Strip into the first stage of a gradual process of constructing a Palestinian state.

If an Abbas-led government operates with statehood logic and proves the ability and willingness to build the capacity for a functional entity, Israel would be able to present the demand that in the first stage, the government focus on rebuilding and developing the Gaza Strip, with the PA in charge of the Gaza Strip crossings. If the Palestinian government demonstrates the desire and the ability, and at the same time operates resolutely to dismantle terrorist and non-state military infrastructures in the Gaza Strip, the second stage would then begin and involve assistance by the international community, Israel, and the Arab world in the processes of construction, including the construction of a naval port (with required security arrangements). After proven progress, development efforts in the third stage would focus on Area C of the West Bank in terms

of construction and economic infrastructures and even the development of new urban centers for rehabilitation of refugee populations from West Bank refugee camps, where conditions are especially harsh.

While this scenario seems highly elusive, it is important that the Israeli government not oppose the principle of reconciliation, and at the same time, advance a different approach to move the political process forward, on condition that Hamas accept the Quartet's three conditions and that the PA government have the monopoly over the use of force in the territory under its control.

