

# The Palestinian National Project Disintegrates with the Separation of Gaza, the Judaisation of Jerusalem and the Jordanisation of the West Bank

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This is not the first time that the Palestinian national project faces challenges so enormous they may threaten the possibility of fulfilling the goal of establishing an independent Palestinian state on the territories occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem. Yet it seems the danger this time surpasses that of the frozen peace process, the continued Israeli occupation and the building of the Apartheid wall, and that it is doing so at an unprecedented rate. The danger now threatens the unity of the Palestinian territories and the political project itself. Specifically, this danger revolves around the following:

**First, indicators and facts on the ground have emerged that point to the separation of Gaza** from the rest of the occupied Palestinian territories and are pushing it towards becoming either an independent entity in itself or an entity somehow affiliated with Egypt.

**Second, there is discussion once again of the Jordanian option**, meaning that the West Bank would revert to Jordanian sovereignty. At a time when we are witnessing indicators that Gaza is drifting away from the Palestinian arena towards Egypt/the Sinai, statements have been made by some Palestinian and Jordanian leaders stressing that the West Bank will necessarily return to the fold of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Their rationale is that the West Bank was under Jordanian control when it was occupied in 1967, but this type of justification implicitly carries the risk of being applied to the Gaza Strip, since it, in turn, was under Egyptian administration at the time of its occupation in 1967.

**Third, the city of Jerusalem has been subject to a systematic process of Judaisation for many years now.**

These threats to the national Palestinian project will produce a catastrophic situation in which the Palestinians will become merely groups living in autonomous regions bound only by a common history but with no present or future.

## **Annexation of the Gaza Strip and Re-annexation of the West Bank**

It seems that Israel's plans to separate the Gaza Strip from the rest of the Palestinian territories have gone beyond the realm of wishful thinking – what Yitzhak Rabin and other Israeli leaders used to dream of – to the phase of actual implementation. Israeli steps seeking to separate the Gaza Strip from the totality of the Palestinian cause have accelerated recently. These moves began with the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, which shaped – according to several experts – the subsequent practical strategic steps in this direction. Israel followed up on this with a series of daily procedures and practices that all serve the same goal. Accordingly, Israel imposed a severe blockade on the Gaza Strip on the eve of Hamas's gaining control of the Strip in June 2007. It then declared the Gaza Strip a "hostile entity." This decision entailed a change in the legal status of the Gaza Strip compared to the rest of the Palestinian territories. These steps resulted in a nearly complete break of commercial relations between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, a decrease in the movement of people between the two areas and the creation of a wide gap in the social, economic and cultural realities of the two regions.

Pursuant to this plan, Israeli policy benefits from the state of difference and political division between the Gaza Strip, which is governed by Hamas, and the West Bank, which is partially ruled by the Palestinian

Authority (PA). The Israeli measures aimed at completely disengaging from and isolating the Gaza Strip were accompanied by a set of procedures and decisions implemented by the Hamas government in Gaza – either intentionally or unintentionally. These procedures and decisions were supported by a number of international institutions and Arab governments, which pushed the Gaza Strip in the same direction. The six years of division have allowed the formation of a reality in the Gaza Strip that is different from that within the West Bank, as well as the creation of a different legal, economic and cultural environment. The tunnel trade between Gaza and Egypt and the emergence of a group dealing in this trade, along with the development of underground trade relations between the two regions and the ensuing increase in the number of beneficiaries of these relations and the political influence thereof, have all made the idea of separation somewhat acceptable. This is taking place in light of regional developments primarily caused by the Arab Spring. Thus, Egypt, essentially Gaza's only neighbour, has come under the rule of Islamists, granting those who dream of separation great hope. Hamas – and the Hamas government – has asked Egypt to open the crossings and its borders with it. Hamas has also requested that Egypt establish a free trade area along the border. This took place within the context of the visit by the Emir of Qatar to Gaza in late October 2012 to announce financial support in the amount of 400 million dollars. This was the first visit conducted to Gaza by an Arab official since 2007. The visit was significant and held a number of important political messages. Some have interpreted it as being the start of the official Arab recognition of the Hamas government in Gaza. While the 400 million dollars announced by the Emir of Qatar was an undoubtedly small sum for the Qatari government, it is still significant for the Hamas government, which suffers from an acute financial crisis that affects its capability to execute the Gaza reconstruction projects as needed. The Emir of Qatar was received ceremoniously. The visit is expected to dispel any reservations that other leaders may have and encourage them to visit Gaza as well. Such visits will surely enhance the desire to separate among some in Gaza or even in the Arab surroundings, and this will undoubtedly assist in the fulfilment of the Israeli dream to separate the Gaza Strip from the remainder of the Palestinian territories. It is worth noting that many Israeli experts and politicians have

not refrained from expressing their desire and hopes that the Gaza Strip will separate from the West Bank and be annexed by Egypt. The most prominent such statement was that made by the former Israeli national security adviser Giora Eiland, who demanded that the Israeli leadership let Hamas in Gaza do as it please and assist it in the implementation of economic development projects for Gaza, in order to consolidate the establishment of a Palestinian state in the Strip. According to him, this would be done by taking large swathes of land from the Sinai Peninsula, granting them to the Palestinians and settling the refugees expected to come to Gaza in those lands, which would give the Israeli government the opportunity to focus on consolidating its control over the West Bank. In light of these indicators, some of which are highly credible, the assurances emanating from the Hamas leaders stating that they do not seek the separation of Gaza and creation of an Islamic emirate are insufficient. The real concern is that what is happening on the ground precedes what politicians are stating. The reality being formed must be confronted with serious work and practical steps. What is required is not statements affirming the unity of Palestinian lands, but rather practical measures to face the reality of separation that is taking shape consciously or unconsciously. Statements alone are not enough.

### **What To Do**

The state of stagnation of the Palestinian reconciliation dossier and the policy of “inaction” adopted by the Palestinian Authority and the Western community in general towards the Gaza Strip were short-sighted and premised upon miscalculations. The policy of “inaction” was a gamble on the time factor and Hamas's inability to remain steadfast and assumed the constancy of regional and international variables and circumstances. This runs contrary to the nature of things, which do not operate in a vacuum and are always changing. The Muslim Brotherhood's ascension to power in neighbouring Egypt and the accumulation of governance expertise by Hamas created favourable conditions for the idea of separation, reducing the desire among some in Hamas for reconciliation and causing frustration for some in the Palestinian Authority. All this has minimised the pace of work towards reconciliation. Further, it cannot be denied that the

idea of reconciliation and the return of Gaza do not enjoy unanimity within decision-making circles in the Palestinian National Authority. There are those who believe that the Palestinian project would be better without Gaza.

In confronting the stagnation of the Palestinian reconciliation dossier, which has caused widespread desolation and opened a space for the emergence of other visions, it is necessary to revive the collective mind set that came into being in May 2011 upon the signing of the reconciliation agreement between Hamas and the PA in Cairo. At the time, a collective mind set was formed, focused on the resumption of unity and the taking of practical steps on the ground. The idea of Gaza's separation became remote not only from peoples' thoughts but also from daily action. Politics does not recognise constancy. If you are not moving, you should not expect the quiescence of the other. One must keep working, moving and offering suggestions, even if there is but a dim hope of results. To this end, the following steps should be taken:

- Revival of the reconciliation dialogues, even if they carry little hope and have come to be viewed by some as boring and not that feasible. The revival of these dialogues will work to push the collective mind set towards the idea of reconciliation and will end the dreams of those seeking separation. It will also create a state of popular and official mobility around this dossier. This, in turn, will reduce the desire of several Arab governments to exploit the stagnation of the reconciliation dossier in order to achieve special gains or private ends.
- Activation of the relationship between the PA in Ramallah and civil society organisations and the private sector through various activities affirming the PA's presence in the Strip. Special emphasis must be placed on the media dimension of such activities. While the PA did not suspend its support for Gaza, this was not announced and the primary focus was on relief and humanitarian issues. Intellectual and strategic discussions on key strategic matters were not initiated.
- The National Authority should abandon its negativity and direct its criticism towards the Rafah crossing and the demands for Egypt to open its border with Gaza to enable the entry of the necessary material and equipment for the national project. This is related to the ongoing proposal of initiatives. In light of Israel's reluctance to allow Egypt to introduce the raw materials needed for reconstruction without their having to pass through the Karam Abu Salem crossing; in light of Egypt's inability to prevent the entry of such material so that, on the one hand, it is not a participant in the blockade and, on the other, it can still abide by the crossings agreement of 2005; and, further, in light of Hamas's keenness to implement the national project quickly, an initiative is needed to fill the vacuum and prevent Hamas from having to resort to the tunnels once again to bring in raw materials and equipment. One proposal in this context is the creation of a transit zone in the Egyptian Rafah region, where the raw materials allocated to Gaza are kept. This zone would be subject to the control and supervision of the National Authority and the international community in the form of the Quartet (the US, the EU, Russia and the UN). This would be done in a way that removes the pretext(s) used by the tunnel merchants and subjects the process of bringing in raw materials to Palestinian/Arab/international supervision. It would also eliminate any potential embarrassment for Egypt and Qatar and fulfil, to a large extent, the stipulations of the crossing and movement agreement of 2005.
- In order to confront concerns over the emergence of the "Jordanian option," first proposed by Israel some time ago and recently revived by certain Jordanian-Palestinian leaders, the PA must take a clear and irrevocable stand rejecting this option and re-affirm that the West Bank is an indispensable part of the Palestinian territory.
- As for Jerusalem: taking into consideration the political and legal situation created by Israel in Jerusalem, whereby the PA is prevented from exercising its sovereignty there, work must focus on three points:
  - Continuing to work with Western governments and international organisations to expose Israeli occupation practices in Jerusalem and requesting the assistance of these states and institutions to enable the PA to expand its services to include Jerusalem.
  - Encouraging international and Palestinian NGOs to further develop their programmes in Jerusalem.
  - Requesting that Arab and Western states that have relations with Israel (e.g., Qatar, Egypt, etc.) focus their programmes on Jerusalem.