

What Stands in the Way of a Palestinian National Consensus?

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Palestinian politics was moribund even before 7 October 2023 upturned assumptions about the Israel-Palestine conflict. The events of that day and all that have followed have not created new intra-Palestinian divisions, but rather exacerbated those that already existed and made the wider political context significantly more difficult, not least in the transformation of Hamas from international outcasts to international pariahs. These divisions have effectively paralysed Palestinian politics, undermining the legitimacy of the Palestinian leadership and allowing Israel to claim that it does not have a negotiating partner for peace, even as it has continued over the last three decades to expand its settlements and continue the confiscation of land on which a future Palestinian state was to be established. The divisions in Palestinian politics do not persist for lack of effort. Reconciliation was floated almost as soon as the divisions between Fatah and Hamas, the two dominant Palestinian factions, escalated into violence in 2007. For the Palestinian factions, reconciliation and renewal are two sides of the same coin. Reconciliation is necessary as all factions need to be involved for political renewal to be credible, and no faction would reconcile without the prospect of political renewal. Since 2007, a number of attempts to bring together Fatah, Hamas and the myriad of smaller groups these two large factions have pushed to the margins have floundered, largely because of the reluctance of Palestinian Authority (PA) President and head of Fatah Mahmoud Abbas to take any sub-

stantive steps that could in any way undermine his power or threaten his position. Understanding how and why he has done that, and who has enabled or allowed him to do that, is critical in understanding what stands in the way of a genuine national consensus and political renewal, arguably an essential prerequisite for a future for Palestinians that is not marred by occupation, violence and dispossession.

From Political Pluralism to a One-Man Show

Before the Oslo Accords, Palestinian politics was characterized by a multitude of resistance factions and robust civic activism across the occupied territories. This changed after Oslo, as Yasser Arafat, then head of Fatah and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the internationally-recognized representative body of the Palestinian people, became head of the new PA, charged with administering the Palestinian territories and supported by Western international donors. Arafat used the funds his position as PA president offered him to consolidate his position through patronage, effectively buying loyalty from those whose support he needed.

Arafat's successor Abbas continued Arafat's use of patronage to consolidate his power, but chose a very different overall strategy to his former leader. As PA President, Arafat chose equivocation and independence from Israel, but spent the last two years of his life besieged in his Ramallah headquarters by Israeli forces. Backed by Israel and the US as a more compliant successor to Arafat, Abbas chose a different course, adhering closely to the role the Oslo Accords set out for the PA, prioritizing and front-loading¹

¹ MUSTAFA, Tahani. "Damming the Palestinian Spring: Security Sector Reform and Entrenched Repression." *Journal of Intervention and State-building*, vol. 9, no. 2 (April 2015), pp. 212-230.

Israeli security, relying on Israeli goodwill to deliver the substantive concessions from Israel that Palestinians needed to build a viable state at some unspecified future date. Abbas' cooperation has been no more successful than Arafat's more confrontational strategy in extracting promised concessions from Israel.

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In tandem with his conciliatory approach, Abbas has moved to consolidate his personal hold on the levers of power while undermining the institutional basis of Palestinian politics, weakening and fragmenting independent opposition and civic activism. His own presidential mandate from the 2005 elections expired in 2010. Abbas side-lined the Palestinian Legislative Council early in his presidency, ruling by presidential decree. Once the driving seat of Palestinian politics and resistance, under Abbas' chairmanship, the PLO has become symbolic and largely toothless, its factions ignored and largely irrelevant, as their leadership has aged and their membership, like their funding, has drifted away. However, their legacy positions in the legislative and executive bodies of the PLO mean that they can still influence discussions on the future course of Palestinian political reform. Under pressure from Israel and Abbas' security forces, Palestinian civil society has been persecuted,² prevented from holding Abbas or Israel to account or fostering anything resembling a national dialogue. There are highly localized civil spaces functioning on the level of towns and cities, but no independent organizations or net-

works spanning all Palestinian communities on the West Bank have been allowed to develop. Palestinian politics has become a zero-sum game in which the PA has ensured, to the extent it is able, that it is the only game in town.

Hamas and Fatah, the Best of Enemies

In this enfeebled context, Hamas has emerged as the only really viable opposition to Abbas and his Fatah movement. Founded in the 1980s as an Islamist alternative to Fatah's secularism, in the 1990s Hamas became a militant alternative to the Fatah-led peace process. Following Arafat's death, Hamas, by far the largest, most organized and active Palestinian group outside of Fatah, automatically became the de facto opposition to Fatah and in the new Fatah-dominated order based on the PA. When the international community and Israel wanted to crown Abbas with democratic legitimacy as Arafat's successor, elections that excluded Hamas would have had no credibility. Hamas cooperated willingly, realizing that maintaining its previous commitment to violent resistance would amount to self-imposed marginalization, and moderated its platform so it would be allowed to participate.

Hamas won the 2006 election on the back of a massive protest vote against the corruption and inefficiency of the PA, and the failure of the peace process. However, Hamas' victory did not please Israel or the PA's Western backers, who encouraged Fatah to launch a coup against Hamas and its new government. This led directly to a civil war and the division of the territories, with Hamas taking control of Gaza, and Fatah the West Bank. Hamas has languished in isolation in the Strip ever since, under a severe Israeli blockade.

Reconciliation attempts began shortly after Hamas' initial electoral victory, but none of the over a dozen initiatives launched since then have produced substantive results. While it is in Abbas' interest that Palestinians see him as serious about Palestinian unity in the face of Israeli expansionism and the excesses of the occupation, any actual concessions

² "Israel/OPT: The stifling of Palestinian civil society organizations must end." Amnesty International, 18 August 2022; "How the Palestinian Authority manages dissent." *Electronic Intifada*, 14 July 2021; "U.S. support is keeping the undemocratic Palestinian Authority alive." *Foreign Policy*, 2 July 2021; and "Neopatrimonialism, Corruption and the Palestinian Authority: Pathways to Real Reform." *Al-Shabaka*, 20 December 2018.

he makes to unity would ultimately lead to a diminution of his power, and eventually to his replacement. Many of the later proposals would have seen his cabinet of loyalists replaced by independent technocrats, and eventually paved the way for presidential and legislative elections, which Abbas would certainly have lost.

Abbas has derailed reconciliation agreements in various ways. He has been inflexible in negotiations, demanding that Hamas accede to all his initial demands as a prerequisite for moving forward in negotiations. These demands included accepting all prior PLO agreements with Israel, Israel's right to exist, the two-state solution and the principle of non-violence – all of which Hamas did finally accept in 2017, with the caveat that it would commit to non-violence if Israel were to show its “seriousness in negotiations.” The 2020 reconciliation agreement was predicated on the holding of elections in which Hamas agreed to participate, but not to secure a majority or run a candidate for the presidency. This agreement collapsed when Abbas cancelled the elections amid internal strife, the ensuing split in Fatah making it likely that he would lose the elections to his former subordinates that were running against him.

Reconciliation in the Shadow of the Gaza War

Amongst Palestinians, Hamas' attack on 7 October did not put them “beyond the pale” as it did with Western leaders. Palestinians have long been accustomed to the brutality of the occupation. Among Palestinians, Hamas has generally been unpopular³ as the government of Gaza, and was most popular⁴ when seen to embody resistance to Israel's occupation. However, the long and brutal Israeli assault on Gaza it unleashed, and the ramping up of settlement expansion and military operations in the West Bank has taken a significant toll on its popularity. While PA of-

ficials have privately expressed the hope that Israel's campaign eliminates Hamas, they have been forced to recognize⁵ that Hamas is likely to survive in some form, and that to move forward and unify Palestinian ranks they will have to deal with the consequences of reconciliation with an international pariah. However, while Western states refuse to have any dealings with Hamas, they do recognize the reality that even after 18 months of Israel's onslaught on Gaza, Hamas would have the incentive and retains the capability to continue armed resistance. It has the ability to act as a spoiler if excluded from any reconciliation agreement.

However, Hamas is not the same movement it was before 7 October 2023. Its attack on Israel was born out of desperation at an intolerable and steadily deteriorating status quo, but has made its situation far worse and its negotiating position with Fatah much weaker. Its new leadership is now likely willing to settle for far less, probably anything that ends the current military action in Gaza and the West Bank and offers the prospect of a real political horizon. Disillusioned with governing and wanting to refocus on becoming a pure resistance organization – peaceful if

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the situation allows for substantive negotiations with Israel, or violent if it does not – Hamas first offered to give up governing Gaza in 2020. Hamas is now clearly looking for an opportunity to relinquish governance of the Strip to a Palestinian administration it

³ JAMAL, Amany A. and ROBBINS, Michael. “What Palestinians Really Think of Hamas.” *Foreign Affairs*, 25 October 2023.

⁴ Public sentiment expressed through successive public opinion polls taken by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research during successive Israeli-Gaza wars, including Public Opinion Poll No. 42, taken in 2011 following a deal in which Israel released 1,027 Palestinian prisoners (including Yahya Sinwar, who would become the leader of Hamas) in exchange for an Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, held captive by Hamas since June 2006; Public Opinion Poll No. 46 taken in the aftermath of the 2012 cross-border skirmish between Hamas and Israel; Public Opinion Poll No. 54, following the 2014 cross-border clash between Hamas and Israel; Public Opinion Poll No. 70, following the 2018 war between Hamas and Israel; and Public Opinion Poll No. 80, following their cross-border conflict in 2021 and Public Opinion Poll No. 90, 22 November-2 December 2023.

⁵ “Palestinian PM: Will Israel's war on Gaza bring Hamas and Fatah together?” Al-Jazeera, 27 October 2023.

views as legitimate, meaning it has the support of all Palestinian factions.

There have been intra-Palestinian and internationally brokered attempts at reconciliation since the 7 October attacks, including those led by Moscow, China and Cairo, but nothing has come of them. Abbas has continued to play spoiler, refusing to sign off on anything agreed by the PLO or even refusing to participate in discussions or engage with intra-Palestinian factions. Frustration with Abbas and his role in blocking all reconciliation, widely recognized as key to any form of effective Palestinian-led post-war governance in Gaza, has mounted, especially among regional states as the potential for massively disruptive fallout from the Gaza war grows.

The only way forward that does not involve more destruction, displacement and death is, as many international actors recognize, a negotiated settlement

The Arab Reform Plan has recently gained the most traction. It involves political reconciliation and a unified Palestinian administration over Gaza and the West Bank, but critically it also involves replacing Abbas with a leader that can more effectively suppress violent opposition, putting a lid on civic and armed resistance that could provoke an Israeli response that could threaten regional security. Under pressure from Arab states, Abbas created the position of vice-president for Hussein al-Sheikh, one of his long-serving lieutenants, in a move that is widely seen as preparing for a succession.

While al-Sheikh has little in the way of popular support or a political faction, he is well-known to and popular with Israel and the US and will likely prioritize their interests above all else. He is also known as a political strongman, and will probably rule in Ab-

bas' stead with an iron fist. He will also likely have little time for reconciliation, political renewal or anything that will dilute his power.

No Way back and No Clear Path forward

The main obstacle to reconciliation over the last two decades has been Abbas. He has blocked any initiative for political renewal. Abbas has been enabled and supported by Israel's Western allies, who have prioritized a compliant Palestinian leadership willing to suppress all resistance, armed and civic, to Israel. His authoritarianism, which removed the need for a popular mandate, has facilitated this. However, the prioritization of Israeli security over Palestinian interests and security that Abbas' authoritarianism has served so well in the short term has come at a cost in the long term. The situation on the ground in the occupied territories has deteriorated significantly under Abbas' tenure, from the punishing and prolonged siege of Gaza to the ramping up of settlement and occupation in the West Bank. The despair and resentment this has fuelled among Palestinians has driven the rise of semi-organized armed groups in the West Bank, a rash of spontaneous lone wolf attacks and ultimately Hamas' self-destructive assault on Israel.

The only way forward that does not involve more destruction, displacement and death is, as many international actors recognize, a negotiated settlement. To be viable, this settlement must be fair and balanced to give Palestinians a stake in their future, and a realistic expectation that security will mean their security as well as that of Israelis. Palestinian political reconciliation and renewal is a prerequisite for a negotiated settlement as they need a legitimate leadership capable of effectively negotiating with Israel. The international community needs to change the way they engage with Palestinians and support, or at the very least not derail any process that can lead to Palestinian political reconciliation and renewal. Depriving Palestinians of viable political alternatives has only fuelled the cycle of violence.