

COMMENTARY

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Palestinian National Unity: Tactical Manoeuvre or Strategic Choice?

Yezid Sayigh

Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut

On 23 April, representatives of Fatah and Hamas, the two movements that have dominated Palestinian politics for decades, announced a new attempt to end the bitter feud that has divided them since June 2007. Under the terms of the reconciliation agreement they signed in Gaza, a national unity government will be set up within five weeks, to be followed by presidential and parliamentary elections in six months. The security agencies are to be restructured, measures leading to societal reconciliation adopted, and public freedoms restored.

The record of past attempts at building national unity is far from encouraging. Fatah and Hamas have never shared a common institutional framework: Hamas has yet to join the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which Fatah has dominated since 1969, and Fatah refused to join the national unity government that Hamas offered to form after it won the Palestinian Authority's general election of January 2006. Reconciliation agreements signed by Fatah and Hamas in Cairo in April 2011 and in Doha in February 2012 were not implemented, as neither movement was genuinely committed and both lacked internal consensus on moving forward. This explains the sceptical welcome given by most Palestinians to the accord of 23 April 2014.

But if Fatah and Hamas persevere, they have a chance to break out of the dead-end in which the Palestinians have been stuck for years. Making national unity a genuine, over-riding priority would help them win back much of their domestic legitimacy, and end the debilitating split of the Palestinian Authority into two rival governments in the West Bank and Gaza. This is the key to restore the credibility of Palestinian decision-making in the moribund peace process with

Israel, with the aim of challenging the deeply flawed U.S. monopoly on diplomatic brokerage and enabling a more assertive European role, and of convincing sceptical Arab states to increase their political and financial support to the Palestinian Authority to compensate for U.S. and Israeli counter-measures.

The task ahead is arduous. The costs will be high and immediate, the rewards uncertain and delayed. But although the obstacles are very considerable, they are not insurmountable. The first, and most challenging, of these is internal. It is all too obvious that the signatories of the April 23 accord were motivated by short-term considerations, and are extremely likely to abandon it as soon as their circumstances change. Fatah and Hamas will have to work hard to stay their new course, and must be equally willing to make significant compromises on core interests and ideological agendas if they are to attain national goals.

The tactical thinking on both sides is clear. Hamas and its government in Gaza are increasingly beleaguered on all fronts: the military-backed authorities in Egypt have all but shut down the border to trade and passage, slashing a major source of public revenue and of income (and arms) on which Hamas relied to make up for the loss of Iranian support and for the unpredictability of Qatari assistance to Gaza's civilian budget and development. Hamas also faces a growing challenge from jihadist groups in Gaza, but fears open rebellion from its own militants should it go too far in reconciling with Fatah or formally espouse negotiations with Israel.

Rapprochement with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas—who doubles as head of Fatah and PLO Chairman—offers a way of easing this isolation, reducing tensions with Cairo and other key Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and potentially improving economic conditions while defusing growing public discontent in Gaza. It also allows Hamas to defer confronting the inevitable question of whether or not it will recognize Israel as an integral part of a two-state solution to the conflict.

Hamas must think beyond the short-term. It has survived in Gaza only through constant crisis management, using the threat of rocket attacks to establish the military and economic terms of tacit coexistence with Israel and relying on a fragile understanding with the rival Palestinian Authority in the West Bank to maintain a flow of financial transfers from foreign donors. These arrangements are susceptible to periodic breakdowns, and allow Hamas and its government merely to subsist. Hamas believed the Arab Spring had decisively ended its strategic predicament by bringing fellow Islamist parties to power in several countries, especially Egypt, but it has had a rude awakening.

Hamas would make a further grievous mistake if it now regards the 23 April national unity agreement as nothing more than a temporary life-saver until some unforeseen development once again transforms its strategic circumstances, allowing it to proclaim the continuing viability of its “resistance/no recognition” motto. But this is sloganeering, not a strategy.

On the other side of the Palestinian divide, Abbas is also using a familiar tactical ploy. He, too, needs badly to improve his domestic image so as to compensate for his embarrassingly obvious inability to halt or even slow the inexorable expansion of Israeli settlements and other encroachments on land and resources in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as the U.S. looks on. The official announcement on 21 April that the PLO's Central Council would debate dissolving the Palestinian Authority if no progress was made in talks with Israel also fell into the category of tactical moves.

But Abbas should not use reconciliation with Hamas simply to counter U.S. pressure to sign a new framework agreement with Israel that reduces what is offered to the Palestinians to the lowest level since the formal start of "final status" negotiations in 1999. Similarly, his decision to authorize a Palestinian application to accede to fifteen international treaties and conventions—which United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon accepted on 10 April—must be more than a tactical manoeuvre if it is to be credible, and effective. The U.S. and Israel have grown too accustomed to regarding Abbas as weak and vacillating, and believe he has no choice but to accept terms. His only hope for gaining genuine leverage is to help set Palestinian political dynamics on a new course.

For this, Abbas needs partnership not only with Hamas, but also with his own movement, Fatah, which still hopes to topple the Hamas government in Gaza. However, Fatah has been paralyzed for years by the petty rivalries of its many "clans," who cloak their competition for influence and resources in supposed differences over their commitment to the national cause. The standing and cohesion of Fatah are being eroded further by the acrimonious challenge posed by the exiled former security chief Mohammad Dahlan, who is using the patronage of the United Arab Emirates and Egypt to make an open bid to replace Abbas.

Internal dynamics on both sides of the Palestinian divide threaten to make the national agenda hostage to the vagaries of wider Arab regional politics at a crucial moment. But too much is at stake for either Fatah or Hamas to allow the national unity agreement to fail. What they started for tactical reasons and self-interest must be transformed into an unswerving, strategic choice. This is essential if the two movements and their allied governments are to confront the financial sanctions that have already been applied by Israel—which has already halted the monthly transfer of US\$100 million in customs revenues and other taxes owed to the Palestinian Authority—and those threatened by Israel's allies in the U.S. Congress.

The fact that the normally docile European Union has already broken ranks with the U.S. to welcome the Palestinian national unity agreement reveals the potential rewards of a new direction in Palestinian politics. Besides underlining that the U.S. can no longer be seen as an honest broker, the European Union is paving the way for a resumption of direct aid to Gaza, despite Hamas's participation in the unity government that is to be formed. Arab states that have

lost faith in Palestinian politics after sponsoring several failed reconciliation attempts—starting with the Mecca accord of March 2007—may now also be convinced that increased assistance a reunited Palestinian Authority and forceful backing for Palestinian diplomacy at the UN are warranted.

For any of this to succeed, Fatah and Hamas must make national unity a concrete reality in every possible way. First, they must be ready to make meaningful mutual concessions on cabinet posts in order to form a politically and professionally credible government. They must subject the management of public finances and services to full transparency and joint accountability, even in sectors that cannot be immediately reintegrated such as security. Second, if Israel prevents the conduct of free presidential and general elections in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which is likely, the reunited Palestinian Authority should hold municipal elections in all areas under its control.

Finally, Fatah and Hamas must form a “historic bloc” that can negotiate a truly binding and lasting peace with Israel. This is indubitably hardest for Hamas, which continues to hide behind a fig-leaf of not recognizing Israel while endorsing Abbas’s authority to negotiate with it. But Fatah also must demonstrate its readiness to risk its acquired privileges in order to empower Palestinian diplomacy and achieve a viable two-state solution, not least by committing to a sustained non-violent campaign to confront Israeli expansionism and control in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. For any political party that wants to attain national goals and position itself as a leading force in Palestinian politics, in future, this is an opportunity. Indeed, it is the only way.

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Dr. Yezid Sayigh, Senior Associate, Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut and a member of the International Advisory Board of MEI@ND. Email: ysayigh@carnegie-mec.org

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