



The Flimsy Palestinian “Unity” Government

by Prof. Hillel Frisch

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Hamas-Fatah unity government is just another example of false unity in the Arab world, and it is unlikely to last long. Born out of weakness, the temporary accord is already unraveling under the weight of deep internal divisions and broader regional tensions. Moreover, Hamas entered the agreement with the intention to overwhelm Fatah in elections. Hamas believes that by striking at Israel it will gain the upper hand in intra-Palestinian politics and win any future election.

Since the heyday of Egyptian leader Gamal Abd al-Nasser, “unity” has been a very popular word in the politics of the Arab Middle East. Like many political buzz words, it is used as often as it is absent. Unity in Arab politics has been all too rare. Despite the pan-Arab unity rhetoric of the past, only one act of unity in the modern Arab Middle East has ever succeeded – the unification of Yemen in 1990 – and even this achievement is very much in doubt today as more and more Arab states, including Yemen, are facing disintegration or partition rather than unity.

Palestinians have hardly been more successful in achieving unity than their fellow Arabs. Their latest exercise in unity, the recent establishment of a “unity government” between Hamas and Fatah, is likely to be no exception to the historic rule.

The unity government between the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Judea and Samaria/the West Bank (headed by Mahmoud Abbas), and the Hamas government which controls the tiny territory of Gaza, purports to be the first of many moves that will bring to an end the bitter and violent intra-Palestinian partition that has been in place since the summer of 2007. At the time, Hamas Izz al-Din al-Qassam brigades expelled the Palestinian Authority’s security forces from Gaza, brutally executed many Fatah

militiamen, and proceeded to establish theocratic rule over Gaza's one and a quarter million people.

Hamas' takeover of Gaza, and the creation of a parallel government that was at odds with its rival, the PA, was a paradoxical outcome of two processes – free and democratic elections held in 2006 and the Oslo negotiations. It was paradoxical because free elections should, in theory, enhance the prospects of democracy. Instead, in both “statelets” one-party rule has prevailed ever since, unencumbered by a legislative council which ceased to exist. Both have proceeded to suppress the party that ruled in the other territory.

Meanwhile, not only did the Oslo peace process lead to a violent conflict between Israel and the Palestinians in the second intifada, but to a civil war between the Palestinians. The two sides began fighting two months after the elections took place and one month after the winning party, Hamas, formed a government, which Fatah never accepted and proceeded to undermine.

To make matters worse, the partition of the Palestinians between two governments separated by Israeli territory, became enmeshed in the growing regional and international rivalry between the moderate Arab states allied with the United States (and locally led by Saudi Arabia), and the Iranian-Syrian axis. Just as this rivalry polarized politics in Lebanon and Iraq, so too did it deepen divisions between the Palestinians themselves.

Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority has largely been entrenched in the American camp. The United States and the Europeans have contributed over 50 percent of the PA budget and trained its security forces and police, usually in Jordan, a state in the same coalition. Abbas maintained warm ties with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.

By contrast, the Hamas external leadership, after its expulsion from Jordan in 1999, established its headquarters in Damascus, and was trained and financed by Iran as one of the proxy forces which Iran supported as part of its strategy to destroy the Jewish state. Even the support Hamas received from Qatar, the only Gulf State to maintain close relations with Hamas, stemmed from the former's long-standing rivalry with Saudi Arabia, rather than out of concern for the Palestinians.

The enmity between the PA and the Hamas entity was expressed in several ways. The most important was the effective security cooperation between the PA and the Israeli security services against their common enemy: Hamas influence and activists in the West Bank. A division of labor emerged, in which the PA uprooted the civil infrastructure of Hamas by day while Israeli security forces apprehended Hamas terrorist suspects at night. This cooperation took place almost on a daily basis. The number and names of the suspects nabbed was a daily feature in the Hamas-controlled media in Gaza.

So deep was Abbas' fear of a Hamas takeover of Judea and Samaria, that in 2008/9 and 2012 Abbas suppressed local protests against Israel's military offensives on Hamas in Gaza.

When the "Arab spring" disturbances erupted, Palestinians expressed hope that the presumed solidarity of the Arab street would bring about a lessening of tensions between Abbas and Hamas. However the Arab upheavals only polarized Arab states and communities, and exacerbated the divisions between the moderate state coalition and the Iranian-Assad-Shiite axis. The rift between secular and fundamentalist forces increased.

These regional tensions only intensified the enmity between Abbas's Palestinian Authority and Hamas. In 2012, when Muhammad Mursi won the elections to become Egypt's first Muslim Brotherhood president, (Hamas' parent organization), Hamas leaders responded with victory processions in Gaza. In Ramallah, the unofficial capital of the Palestinian Authority, the news was greeted with stony silence and fear. The situation reversed itself after Minister of Defense Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi ousted Mursi from office in July 2013 and drove the Muslim Brotherhood underground. Abbas and his entourage were now all smiles and it became time for Hamas to worry over its political future.

If the rift was so deep, what brought Hamas and Fatah to establish a unity government of "technocrats" and to commit the two sides to holding presidential and parliamentary elections?

The answer, in a nutshell, was mutual weakness. Abbas was getting nowhere in the peace process. The gaps between the PA and Israel over the major issues was simply too wide, and at 78 years old, Abbas was hardly about to take the domestic risks necessary to bridge these gaps. He preferred domestic legitimacy over diplomatic breakthrough.

Hamas was facing an increasingly hostile Egyptian regime that accused it of abetting fundamentalist terrorism in Egyptian Sinai and areas even closer to the Egyptian capital. Egypt retaliated by closing the Rafah border crossing – the lifeline for Gaza to the Arab world and beyond. Hamas was also reeling under financial pressures. Recently, Iran lowered financial support after Hamas refrained from supporting Syrian President Assad against his Sunni opposition. Hamas hardly had a choice in this matter. After all, Hamas is a Sunni fundamentalist group, and thus naturally inclined against the pro-Shiite Syrian regime.

The recent kidnapping of three Israeli teenage students near Jerusalem hints at another Hamas strategy. Hamas entered into the "unity" agreement with the Fatah-led PA with the intention to overwhelm Fatah in the planned elections. One way that Hamas intends to rout Fatah is by capturing the

Palestinian street. Hamas thinks it can do so by kidnapping Israelis and forcing the Israeli government to release Palestinian terrorists from jail – as it did through the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit. There is nothing more popular on the Palestinian street than getting security prisoners out of Israeli jails. In short, Hamas believes that by striking at Israel it will gain the upper hand in intra-Palestinian politics and win any future election.

The kidnapping is probably the death knell in the recent attempt at unity. Preceding it were other moves that showed the unity government was more show than substance. The PA continues to arrest Hamas suspects. Meanwhile, the new government also failed to come up with the funds to pay 40,000 government employees, mostly teachers, the Hamas government hired in Gaza since 2007. Hamas retaliated by sending its police in Gaza to close banks and confiscate money machines, in order to prevent the 70,000 employees who were on the Abbas PA payroll from receiving their salaries. The stalemate lasted for seven days until Qatar committed itself to pay the Hamas employees, but they have yet to be paid.

Much thornier issues await resolution further down the line. Egypt will only open the border crossing on a regular basis if Abbas' security forces will run it, as stipulated in an international agreement brokered before the Hamas takeover. Hamas is understandably reluctant. Even more difficult is trying to create a unified security force, the bugbear of it all.

In short, the new unity government is likely to meet the fate of dozens of other failed unity schemes in the Arab world.

In this state of flimsy unity/disunity, the Palestinians are clearly in keeping with the times. With Sunni Islamic fundamentalists at the gates of Baghdad and the partition of the Iraqi state a real possibility; Syria and Libya in civil war; Yemen fighting for its life facing Shiite Huthi opposition in the north, and rebels in the south who want to succeed; and al-Qaeda offshoots everywhere – the partition of the Palestinians into two entities is by comparison a relatively peaceful and livable situation.

Prof. Hillel Frisch, a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, is a professor of political studies and Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University.

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