



# PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## **Hamas-Fatah: The Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship?**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The series of blows the US administration has dealt to the Palestinian Authority over the past year, from the announcement of the “Deal of the Century” to the normalization accords between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan, has led to an attempted reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. The Istanbul Agreement signed on September 24 reflects a rare commonality of interests between the two organizations, which understand the mood of the Palestinian public and are again trying to achieve unity even at the possible cost of Hamas taking over the PA and the PLO.

For years, Hamas has opposed joining forces with the PLO because of the relative balance of power in the Palestinian street. With its power among the Palestinian population standing at 30-40%, Hamas insisted on similar representation in PLO institutions. At present, Fatah still controls 40% of the PLO institutions and is in charge of the organization’s decisions.

The latest crisis besetting the Palestinian Authority could lead to rare Palestinian unity that would allow the two organizations to form a common front against Israel and the US. Not only have three Arab states reached normalization accords with Israel, flouting the position of the Arab League as embodied in the Saudi Initiative since 2002, but the League has refused to condemn them for taking that step. This was the next in a series of blows the PA has been dealt by the Trump administration, most of all the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and the launching of the “Deal of the Century.”

In view of the Arab-Israeli normalization deals and the marginalization of the Palestinian problem in regional and international politics, the Palestinian public increasingly feels the time has come to end the rift between Fatah and Hamas and build a united front that can salvage the Palestinian national movement. Turkey,

where senior Hamas officials reside (notably Deputy Head of the Political Bureau Salah Aruri), has assumed the role of mediator.

On September 24, the two organizations signed a reconciliation agreement after talks at the Palestinian Consulate in Istanbul between Jibril Rajoub, secretary-general of the Fatah Central Committee, and the Hamas leadership. The agreement envisages elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council and later also for the presidency within about half a year from the signing of the agreement. The burning issues on which the new national unity needs to focus are: “The state[-building] program, the program of popular resistance to the Deal of the Century, the annexation and the normalization [of relations] with the occupation.”

A [survey](#) by the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found that 99% of the Palestinian population polled in the West Bank and Gaza viewed the accords with the UAE and Bahrain as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. On the other hand, 53% of the respondents blame themselves and internal Palestinian discord for the fact that their issue has lost its importance in the eyes of the Arab world. The Palestinians understand that they cannot level accusations at Arab states when they themselves maintain political, security, and economic ties with Israel. In addition, a majority of Palestinians (86%) see the accords as mainly serving Israel’s purposes and not benefiting the Palestinians, despite the deferral of the extension of sovereignty to parts of the West Bank. They view this as merely a lull (75% of respondents believe PM Netanyahu’s avowal that the accords only delayed the extension of sovereignty and did not remove it from the agenda).

Thirty-eight percent of respondents say the best path to Palestinian self-government is through renewing the “armed struggle” (i.e., terror attacks), and 75% oppose a possible return of Israeli or Civil Administration rule and/or any military or civilian cooperation with Israel. Sixty-two percent believe that, in light of Israel’s moves and the expansion of Israeli communities, the two-state solution is no longer achievable. The Palestinian state has never appeared so distant to this population.

This last finding is the most significant in terms of the feasibility of intra-Palestinian reconciliation, which enjoys huge support in the Palestinian street. If there is no security or civilian cooperation with Israel and no real chance of progress in the negotiations channel, then what is the difference between Hamas and Fatah? Hence, at least at the present juncture where further negotiations with Israel are not on the agenda and the Arab states are turning a blind eye to the Palestinian problem, there is a place for another reconciliation pact that will solve the crisis and mend the leadership rift.

This means Fatah will have to come to terms with the fact that Hamas will gain a larger part of the PLO, and might even take it over completely. Time will tell if the Istanbul Agreement will succeed where all previous reconciliation agreements from 2007 to the present have failed.

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