

The Palestinian Narrative of Reconciliation

Written by Atef Alshaer

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ATEF ALSHAER, MAY 27 2014

The recent reconciliation accord between Fatah and Hamas, which presumably puts an end to seven years of harmful impasse between the two parties, has been positively viewed among the Palestinians and Arabs in general, despite great misgivings about the potential of its implementation. The accord is the latest among several others that preceded it in the direction of uniting the Palestinians around a common set of objectives to cement their internal front vis-à-vis the Israeli occupation. There is no doubt that Palestinian unity has always been vitally essential to any progress within Palestine and for relations with any other country, let alone Israel. The latter continues to behave in an obdurate manner that makes the potential for peace with it essentially unrealisable in its current state. The Israeli expansion of settlements – which even its strongest allies, mainly the US administration, is irritated with – the demolition of Palestinian homes, the arbitrary arrests, the continuous use of violence, the crippling siege of Gaza, the deadly attacks in civilian areas, the callous treatment of Palestinians, and other Israeli practices targeting Palestinian livelihoods – all these make peaceful negotiations with Israel towards a permanent settlement to the conflict untenable. Finally it seems that the Palestinian leadership as headed by the PLO has recognised that Israel is not remotely interested in a peace foregrounded in international law and rectification of major past and present injustices against the Palestinian people.

Against this background, the reconciliation accord between Fatah and Hamas is meant to strengthen the Palestinians against internal and external challenges. Some of these challenges relate to the conditions of each movement in their Arab and international contexts. The Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who also leads Fatah and the PLO, has reached a deadlock in terms of the negotiations with Israel for the reasons given above. On the other hand, Hamas has come under pressure from Egypt and other Arab governments. This is particularly so in light of the newly imposed strictures on Muslim Brotherhood affiliates in Egypt, of which Hamas is originally an offshoot of some sort. The extreme economic hardships faced by people in Gaza, which were previously partially lessened through reliance on tunnel-based economic sources facilitated by Egyptian obliviousness, have decreased with the installing of a regime in Egypt unfriendly to Hamas. The Egyptian government and its popular face, General al-Sisi, have clearly indicated their dislike and hostility to the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas as an ideological extension to the mother movement. Therefore, Hamas, which has held sole governance in Gaza following a short-lived civil war with Fatah in 2007, had realised that it could not sustain its governance in economic and political terms without an alliance with Fatah, who remains acceptable regionally and internationally. While these are the realpolitik aspects that underpin the move towards reconciliation between the two parties, it has always been the case that the Palestinians could not move forth as a political cause without a united leadership that speaks on their behalf and consolidates their struggle for freedom from the Israeli occupation.

Fatah and Hamas, despite their ideological differences and approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and their vision of state and society, remain the backbone of Palestinian nationalism. Their reconciliation, if implemented, will have serious consequences for the Palestinians who have been deeply hurt by the division and its ramifications. Neither of these movements could find a solution for the Palestinian predicament without the other. Their realisation that they echo wider societal and political structures could only impress on them the significance of their unity, which will be tested by internal and external pressures. Both movements have edged closer to each other in terms of their political visions, as far as Israel is concerned. They agree on a two-state solution based on 1967 territories as enshrined in relevant United Nations resolutions. Yet, despite the proximity of their political programs, which is occasionally obscured by rhetorical shows employed for the satisfaction of their varied constituencies, Hamas is

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particularly deemed terrorist by the US in a way that makes its reconciliation with Fatah unacceptable.

To this end, Israel has rejected the accord between Fatah and Hamas, and so has the US. The latter saw the reconciliation as an impediment to the already moribund peace process. It has become clear that the peace process is only that: a 21-year-old process with no definite outcome that could potentially fulfil the Palestinian rights and aspirations for liberation from the Israeli occupation. Even the US administration seems to have come to realise the absurdity of the process, with the Secretary of State John Kerry hinting at Israel's expansion of settlements as a continuous major hurdle in the peace process. After all, it was Israel that refused to release a batch of Palestinian prisoners, which it had previously agreed to but reneged on, which halted the negotiations. In the face of this, the Palestinians have no choice but to strengthen their internal front, an overdue national demand. For its part, the extreme right wing government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – which includes even more extreme elements, such as the minister of trade and the head of the Jewish Home, Natalie Benet – has depicted the necessary Palestinian reconciliation as signalling the end of the peace process. In his communication with Secretary Kerry, Netanyahu stated, "Whoever wants peace with Hamas is not interested in peace with Israel." This statement summarises the *modus operandi* of Israel, which does not only intend to divide the Palestinian territories into unviable enclaves, as it has effectively done, but also the Palestinian people themselves. For the Palestinians, his statement defies the logic as premised on the fact no Palestinian leader could sign an accord with Israel without popular Palestinian support, including from Hamas, which is part of the fabric of the Palestinian society and its political history. It is in the interest of all concerned, including Israel and its strongest ally, the US, that Palestinians should be united.

At this juncture, it is necessary to test the conditions and the historical experience of the Palestinians with the latest internal Palestinian accord in mind. The reconciliation, while vital for several reasons mentioned before, remains fragile. The Palestinians are suspicious of serious reconciliation, given similar previous experiences, hence their cautious reception of the news of reconciliation. Fatah and Hamas have proven resilient in protecting their political interests in selfish ways that effectively deviate from the real interests of the Palestinian people and their national cause, which in its essence is premised on liberation from the Israeli occupation. There are various practical and ideological differences which could prove more difficult to surmount by the parties in question. Hamas, while it uses a combination of religious and practical discourses to appeal to its constituency, particularly in Gaza, feels relatively comfortable in its governance of Gaza. Fatah, on the other hand, has amassed wealth and prestige to its cadres and the bureaucratic authorities in the West Bank and Gaza. This condition makes the potential for change in these entrenched structures of governance challenging, not to say suspect. Therefore, the comfort of governance for both parties could obstruct the efforts to create a united Palestinian Authority under one political leadership with shared strategies and objectives. This is so whether in relation to the internal management of Palestinian affairs or the conflict with Israel. Yet, the assurances given by both parties this time, in light of the real external pressures which disturb their modes of governance and the maintenance of well-being for their constituents, might ironically guarantee success to reconciliation.

If reconciliation is successful, and governance between Gaza and the West Bank is integrated under one authority, this could lead to other challenges and opportunities as well. The Palestinians would have once again rallied around the solidity of their common purpose for liberation from the Israeli occupation. They would have devoted themselves to devising strategies for freedom and statehood. They would also be able to maintain their relations with the outside world on the basis of shared Palestinian framework of governance. They would resist the siege on Gaza as one people with a shared history and common aspirations. They would also take themselves further in the road to a productive dialogue and democracy towards organising elections for the parliament and presidency, which is part of the reconciliation accord. If all these were to be achieved by the reconciliation, the Palestinians can justly celebrate their survival and resilience in the face of seemingly endless external pressures and strangling from the Israeli occupation to divide and tear them and their nationhood aspirations apart.

In fact, some persistently argue, and not unjustifiably, that the time for the oft-repeated mantra of the two-state solution between the Palestinians and Israelis has already been surpassed. Hence, it is never too late for the Palestinians to strengthen their internal core and update their struggle towards a one-state solution where Palestinians and Israelis enjoy equal rights within one state, as happened in South Africa under the great South

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African leader Nelson Mandela. The formula of one-state solution for the Palestinians and Israelis is increasingly gaining attention and conviction from international and local observers, including eminent politicians who see the intractability of the communities on the ground — an unequal intractability for now. It is clear that Israel has created a de facto situation of apartheid, dividing the Palestinian territories in the West Bank and East Jerusalem into unviable enclaves along ethnic lines. These divisions are surrounded with settlements and connected through Jews-only bypass roads and areas, in addition to swallowing the bulk of vital and resourceful Palestinian areas. This situation makes the potential for two-state solution impractical, whereas the one-state solution is one that could serve as an aspirational solution towards peace and coexistence for both peoples, the Palestinians and the Israelis. As Edward Said, the visionary Palestinian scholar, who understood the flawed character of the peace process as launched with Oslo Accord in 1993, put it:

The simple fact is that the Jewish and Palestinian experiences are historically, indeed organically, connected: to break them asunder is to falsify what is authentic about each. We must think our histories together, however difficult that may be, in order for there to be a common future. And the future must include Arabs and Jews together, free of any exclusion, denial-based schemes for shutting out one side by the other, either theoretically or politically. That is the real challenge. The rest is much easier (2002, p.209).

References

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Atef Alshaer is a Lecturer in Arabic Language and Culture at the University of Westminster. He has several publications on the Arab world in the field of literature, language and Politics. He was educated at Birzeit University in Palestine and SOAS, University of London, where he obtained his PhD and taught for a number of years.