

Fateh and Hamas: A coalition in the making?

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We are currently witnessing the historic transformation of Hamas from a popular movement based on armed struggle and opposition to the established Palestinian order. Hamas has managed to firmly place itself within that order in a bid to confirm its position, power and legitimacy both inside Palestinian society and outside.

It is doing so at, for it, a politically advantageous time and after much thought. Indeed, what we are witnessing now is the unfolding of a four-point doctrine laid down by assassinated Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin some two years ago: First, the implementation of a ceasefire, whether formal or not. Second, a bid, through the ballot box, to take a share of political power on the internal Palestinian scene, while distancing itself explicitly from the Oslo Accords. So far, this has expressed itself in the movement's successful municipal elections campaigns and the decision to stand for the legislative elections currently scheduled to take place in July. The third point of Yassin's "agenda" was to challenge other Palestinian factions'--read Fateh's--dominance over Palestinian political legitimacy, realizing that only through elections can the movement punch its proper weight in society, and, what is more and often ignored, determine the extent of its popular power base.

The final and probably most significant item on Yassin's strategic list was the implicit acknowledgement of the PLO's 1988 decision to endorse the two-state solution, i.e., a Palestinian state on all territory occupied in 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and a solution to the issue of refugees to be found according to international law based on UN General Assembly Resolution 194. Regardless of whether or not this is explicitly acknowledged by Hamas as a permanent or temporary solution, it will become the movement's operational political guideline.

Hamas has changed with the times. This is a quite natural process: when you talk to people in 2005 it is no longer like talking to people back in 1995. For the past four years, the lives of the Palestinians have been dominated by what I call the three Gs: guns, guards and gates. They live in the biggest prison in the world. In response to the hardships encountered and the forlornness of their situation people have started looking to the fourth G--God. They are doing so in a bid to maintain their identity, their heritage and their culture without surrendering in this prison.

People are realistic, and, however painfully, they have to contend with the "culture of the prison" that has been imposed upon them by Israel. The question facing people at present is how to survive in this prison without giving up their dreams, dignity and demands, and without losing the last bit of a hope for a better future. The task for the factions in this

context is to develop a strategy to get out of the prison with the cross-factional priority being to bring the bleeding and suffering of the people to an end.

Today, leaders of political factions, including Hamas and Fateh and regardless whether based inside or outside Palestine, as well as leaders of civil society, have realized that one prerequisite for surviving in this prison is for everyone to join efforts and work together.

However, what is still lacking is an overall strategy for changing the general environment and possibly undoing the ever increasing disturbing facts accomplished, particularly Israel's separation barrier and the settlements, which have become the dominant factors determining the future not only of Palestine, but of Israel, too. The situation on the ground cries for a fast change since, for as long as Jewish settlers are determining the agenda of the Israeli government and Palestinians are only reacting to what Israel is doing, the peoples on both sides will suffer and the Palestinian prison will only become more entrenched.

One of the main questions regarding Hamas' entry into the PLO house is thus whether or not this will be accompanied or followed by the development of such an urgently needed strategy across factional lines. In this respect, it is important also to note the effect on Fateh.

Hamas' challenge to Fateh is not new, but at this stage in history it hurts Fateh doubly because the latter is weakened by intra-party divisions, mainly along the rift between the so-called old vs. new guards. Fateh itself has undergone several transitions in recent history, from a military resistance movement to a governing political faction; from negotiators to developers of a political agenda to creators of a movement that finds itself caught between armed and non-violent resistance options and has to perform its role as a player on the international arena. To handle all these tasks effectively and maintain, at the same time, unity among its ranks, is the biggest challenge Fateh itself is currently facing. In order to succeed, it will have to solve its leadership crisis in a convincing way and prove its ability to develop a coherent vision for the future.

Nevertheless, both Fateh and Hamas have made a major step in the required direction by agreeing to share political power. If their intentions are serious they have climbed a major hurdle on the way to develop a joint--that is a Palestinian--strategy for the future. However, it remains to be seen whether either or both--and here we must not forget the crucial part that might be played by the leftist groups as well as forces from within the civil society sector--are prepared to truly erase their political colors for the sake of the Palestinian nation and the unity that is so desperately needed.

I remain skeptical. Hamas' entry into Palestinian Authority institutions is the right step in this context, but only the first of many that are needed.

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