

# “ARAB SPRING”: WEATHER FORECAST FOR PALESTINE

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The Arab revolts that started in late 2010 have ushered in a new political era in the region that is likely to affect Arab societies and politics for a long time. Thus far, the revolts have led to the overthrow of five rulers, spread to countries such as Jordan and Bahrain, and severely afflicted Syria, where a bloody internal conflict is being fought. This changing political landscape also has consequences for Palestinian political groups, particularly Hamas. In reacting to the ongoing changes, the movement may have to adjust its political and ideological outlook profoundly, both in its approach towards internal Palestinian relations and in its handling of the conflict with Israel. This paper outlines the implications of the revolts for the first of these aspects. The discussion will be driven by the idea that, although it is premature to draw conclusions about the gains and losses for Hamas, its calculus is a mixed one. Hamas has, for example, gained the support of countries such as Egypt (at least until the recent overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi) and Tunisia, but lost the backing of other countries, the most important being Syria and Iran.

These developments have provoked

adjustments in the power balance within the movement's leadership and caused Hamas to rethink some of its positions on reconciliation with Fatah.<sup>1</sup> It may well be that the ongoing regional developments will nudge Hamas towards moderation on certain issues in its relations with European countries and the United States. Being pragmatic, Hamas has observed the moderate tendencies of the Islamist-oriented Arab governments in Tunisia and (until recently) in Egypt, which are showing openness and flexibility towards the West, with Egypt for example upholding the peace treaty with Israel. Hamas thought it could ally itself with these countries if it were not to remain radical. On the other hand, a stronger Hamas is also likely to push the movement towards inflexibility on issues related to its domestic relations, strengthening its stance regarding the terms of reconciliation with Fatah. The latter shift is likely to weaken further the prospects for Palestinian nationhood rather than advancing their national project towards true sovereignty and independence.

## DEALING WITH THE REVOLTS

In order to assess Hamas's views, decisions and goals regarding the Arab revolts,

it is important to outline the movement's situation at their outset. Despite its victory in the 2006 elections and subsequent seizure of power over Gaza in 2007, Hamas has been diplomatically isolated, cash-strapped, under international boycott, attacked by Israeli and Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces in the West Bank, and cautiously handling a shaky truce with Israel. Hamas has found itself cornered: an Islamist movement constrained by secular governance, and a resistance movement locked in a tit-for-tat battle with Israel. Having seen its popularity wane since the 2006 elections, Hamas has been criticized from both within and outside and suffered defections by some militants, who left the movement to join groups committed to instituting Islamic law and engaging in jihad against Israel.

In its initial response to the Arab revolts, Hamas deliberately adopted a wait-and-see attitude. The movement did not wish to be perceived as supporting one side or the other, despite the harsh treatment it had received from some of the ousted regimes in the past. The main reason Hamas did not declare its support for the protesters and their demands was that it wanted to avoid being blamed or boycotted later on.<sup>2</sup> The movement also remembered that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had paid dearly for Yasser Arafat's support of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which resulted in the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from Kuwait after the Iraqi troops had been driven out.

As early as 2011, Hamas considered the Arab revolts an opportunity that would provide a new strategic environment closer to the movement's ideology and supportive of its line of resistance. The leadership believed that the new power wielders in

the region would support not only lifting the Israeli siege of Gaza, but also reconciliation with Fatah and a reorganization of Palestinian politics in which Hamas would become effectively involved in determining national priorities. Hamas expected the revolts to strengthen its ties with other Arab Islamists, which in turn would heighten its political stature in domestic politics. Hamas perceived the revolts as developments that would ultimately advance the movement's primary goals of holding on to its control in Gaza, ending its diplomatic isolation, weakening Fatah's grip on the West Bank, and strengthening regional alliances in opposition to Israel.

The hopes for stronger political backing, however, have been dashed. The new regimes have been preoccupied with their domestic political, economic and social upheavals. The revolts have, in fact, turned into both a blessing and a curse for Hamas. On the one hand, they have strengthened the movement's bonds with allies of the United States such as Egypt, Qatar and Turkey. But on the other, they have exacerbated tensions with traditional allies such as Syria, Iran and Hezbollah. These changing alliances have raised concern in the movement's different locales.<sup>3</sup> In the past, Hamas managed to keep its internal discussions private. From late 2010, however, the political fallout of the Arab revolts strained the movement both locally and regionally.

The revolt in Syria posed the most pressing concern, forcing Hamas to choose between two irreconcilable positions: supporting either the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood or the Assad regime. Hamas is indebted to that regime for its support of the Palestinian cause. Breaking with Syria would also anger Iran, which had been Hamas's largest financial backer. Hamas

was grateful for the longstanding moral support it had received from the Syrian people, as well as its connection with the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. Yet another concern was the movement's obligations vis-à-vis the Palestinian refugees in Syria, who could be made to suffer for the decisions of their political leaders. In late 2011, Hamas declared its unequivocal support for the Syrian rebels and the Muslim Brotherhood.

By declaring its support for the Syrian rebels, the movement began a new era of regional alliances, defined by financial scarcity and affecting its military strength. The Syrian government had offered substantial economic support, with few or no preconditions, and had hosted Hamas's external leadership since 1999. Furthermore, by abandoning the Syrian government, Hamas has effectively weakened its ties with both Hezbollah and Iran. The latter is estimated to have contributed over recent years at least \$280 million annually to the Hamas entity in Gaza, much of it through arms.<sup>4</sup> The new allies are less generous. Turkey, flirting with resuming diplomatic ties with Israel, is cautious. Qatar, a moderate party that enjoys close ties with the United States, provides assistance under the condition that it not be used for arms. Egypt is in a transitional political stage and not able or inclined to offer much financial support, even before it severed its relations with the movement after the ousting of Morsi by the military in June 2013.

Depending on Hamas's decision whether to continue armed resistance, these developments may have different implications. Even though Hamas has lost a considerable amount of financial support from Iran and Syria, the severance may have a positive outcome. If Hamas distances itself from anti-Western stances and

abandons armed resistance, it may eventually enter the circle of so-called moderate Muslim movements and face less antagonism, perhaps even an end to the Western boycott.

Hamas's relations with Egypt were also affected by the outcome of the Arab revolts, though not in the way the movement had expected. In the years preceding the upheavals, Egypt was close to Fatah but was not an ally of Hamas. The fall of Mubarak and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood were therefore expected to benefit Hamas at the expense of Fatah. But in Egypt, from the beginning of their rule the Islamists failed to reach an understanding with the other, mainly secular, political parties over the constitution and other important political issues. Instead of adopting a new strategy regarding the question of Palestine, past approaches were maintained and reinforced. This lack of genuine change in bilateral relations with Gaza has irritated Hamas and prompted its leaders to express their discontent with post-Mubarak Egypt. For example, restrictions at Gaza's Rafah crossing have not been eased. Post-Mubarak Egypt has not heeded its promises to keep the Rafah crossing open; Gaza's citizens still cannot move freely.<sup>5</sup> There have, however, been positive signs as well. Egyptian President Morsi's personal intervention to end the Israeli attacks on Gaza in November 2012 was welcomed as an indication of full support for Hamas. Another sign of warming relations occurred when Hamas declared its supposed victory over Israel from Cairo. Furthermore, it can be considered a sign of mutual trust that even the dismantling of tunnels between Gaza and Egypt would be approved by Hamas if Egypt were to allow for the permanent opening of the Rafah crossing for goods and individuals.<sup>6</sup> However, the relationship

between the two sides has been profoundly severed after the military ousted Morsi from office in July 2013, and it has since been revealed that Hamas was actively involved in Egyptian affairs on behalf of the Muslim Brothers.

Yet, Hamas's quest for stronger ties with post-Arab-Spring countries is being compromised by the regimes' need to tackle the socioeconomic and political challenges lying ahead of them.<sup>7</sup> The difficulty of overcoming these complex challenges implies that the new government will have to pay less attention to Palestinian politics.

### DEBATING THE RESULTS

The discussion within Hamas of the impact of the Arab revolts is complicated by a number of factors: geographic dispersion, political and ideological differences, individual contentions, as well as the varying roles of Hamas's political, military, religious, and governance activities and interests. Until late 2012, the Islamist opposition parties in several Middle East countries were expected to be empowered. At the time, the Arab Spring seemed a pivotal moment in history that strengthened Hamas; but the optimism has dwindled, and new approaches have been needed to deal with new realities.

The Hamas leadership saw two main ways to benefit from the revolts. The first, articulated mainly by the outside leadership represented by Khaled Meshal, is based on a pragmatic understanding of the implications of the Arab revolts, considering their benefit to all of Palestine and its national cause. This view maintains that the revolts have opened the way for Hamas to take bold steps toward Palestinian unity by engaging in national politics in the PA's various institutions in order to consolidate the movement's standing and to integrate

it locally, regionally and internationally. This flexible view has been supported by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, since it would move Hamas towards moderation and recognition from Western countries.

The second assessment, propagated by the internal Gaza leadership and Mahmoud Al-Zahar, often considered hawkish, stresses the need to be cautious amidst an uncertain regional future in order to gain political advantage over Fatah. In this view, the revolts are seen as benefiting Hamas, but the movement must cling to its Gaza stronghold until the PA in Ramallah is weakened,<sup>8</sup> economic conditions in Gaza are improved, and the movement's allies in the Arab countries are strengthened and consolidated. Al-Zahar is convinced that time is on Hamas's side and that the movement will benefit from being patient.<sup>9</sup>

Within Hamas, important decisions are taken collectively through the Shura Council, which meets in undisclosed locations and conducts extensive consultation on the various issues it deals with in order to reach a consensus. Khalid Solaiman, a Hamas representative from the Reform and Change bloc, states,

Differences are signs of health and livelihood, an indication that Hamas is not a dead body. It is entirely logical that differences arise when the movement is dealing with complex issues that require extensive debate and thinking. This openness gives room for differences of opinion.

Solaiman also stresses that,

when differences emerge, they are related to the details and not to the basic principles the movement stands for, namely: Islam is Hamas's main reference, the liberation of entire Palestine

is its ultimate objective, all forms of resistance are permissible, including armed resistance, and coexistence with other groups and ideologies on the basis of mutual recognition and respect is welcomed ... The debate within Hamas revolves around how to derive sound means and how to better serve the stated principles.<sup>10</sup>

Differences within Hamas should not be understood simply as expressions of tension between “moderates” and “radicals.” Such a distinction is difficult to establish since individual voices may be allocated to either camp at different times and regarding differing issues. For example, Mahmoud Al-Zahar strongly opposed the reconciliatory Doha agreement signed with Fatah in February 2012, but he has decried the launching of attacks on Israel from Gaza (usually carried out by Salafi groups, such as Islamic Jihad) as a betrayal of Hamas’s strategy of preserving the truce (*tahdia*) with Israel. In his view, such attacks are harmful to the movement; they must be stopped and their perpetrators punished. Musa Abu Marzouq, often described as a moderate, supported the Doha agreement, but opposed the release of Israeli soldier Gilead Shalit and is working to preserve relations with Iran.<sup>11</sup>

### RESORT TO AMBIGUITY

The uncertainty of future conditions in Arab countries has progressively affected Hamas’s strategizing, producing a parallel ambiguity within the movement regarding most issues. This was demonstrated by Khaled Meshal. In a television interview in November 2012, Meshal expressed positions that are almost identical to those of Fatah: “I accept a Palestinian state according [to] the 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as the capital, and with the right

to return.” Asked about recognizing Israel, he said: “Such a declaration could only be made once a Palestinian state has been created, and after this state is established, it decides its standing towards Israel.” Furthermore, regarding Hamas’s willingness to renounce violence, he declared: “We are ready to resort to a peaceful way, a purely peaceful way without blood or weapons.” He asserted, however, that such a move would be conditional on key Palestinian national demands, namely “the elimination of occupation, and the [creation of] a Palestinian state.”<sup>12</sup>

Two weeks later, Meshal expressed quite different and much more defiant views: “The Jewish state will be wiped away through resistance.... The state will come from resistance, not negotiation.... Liberation first, then statehood.” He declared, “Palestine is ours from the river to the sea and from the south to the north. There will be no concession of any inch of land.” Meshal also vowed that “all Palestinian refugees and their descendants will one day return to their original homes.” He added: “We will never recognize the legitimacy of the Israeli occupation, and therefore there is no legitimacy for Israel, no matter how long it will take... We will free Jerusalem inch by inch, stone by stone. Israel has no right to be in Jerusalem.” He also promised to bring about the release of Palestinian prisoners held in Israel by capturing more Israeli soldiers.<sup>13</sup>

It is difficult to reconcile these two views, but with his conciliatory statements in Western media, Meshal intended not only to present Hamas as a moderate group that abides by “the rules of the game,” namely UN resolutions and international and humanitarian law, but also to demonstrate Hamas’s willingness to find a just solution to the conflict with Israel. His defiant

Gaza speech, however, was tailored to an audience of Hamas members and supporters during the celebration of their recent “divine victory” over Israel.<sup>14</sup> His intention here was to build confidence and assurance in the overriding goal of attaining national rights for Palestinians living under most difficult circumstances and bearing daily the brutal force of Israel’s occupation.

Meshal’s overall reasoning could be that when there is no substitute for respect for Palestinian rights, Hamas’s response has never been submission and will always be resistance.<sup>15</sup> But this logic would explain only some of the discrepancies. The statements differed not only because they were directed at two separate audiences, stressing therefore a different direction and emphasis. They also reflected an approach Hamas has shown frequently over the years, adopting apparently irreconcilable positions and resorting to broad and ambiguous statements on certain issues in order to expand its room for maneuver. This strategy seeks to benefit from leaving different options open, allowing the movement to follow either dogma or flexibility, depending on the circumstances. Therefore, Hamas boycotted the 1996 elections, but took part in the elections 10 years later; it employed armed resistance while adopting political strategies and governing the Gaza entity; and it has stressed its nature as a resistance movement while maintaining very close ties with moderate countries like Qatar.

The approach adopted by Hamas in response to the lack of support from newly formed Arab governments is therefore not new; it has been employed frequently since 2006. To maintain the movement’s internal unity and to preserve its rule in Gaza, Hamas is putting strategic choices on hold and falling back to the default position of ambiguity on key issues, including the

settlement of the conflict with Fatah by completing the reconciliation (*musalaha*).

### ISSUES OF DIVERGENCE

Since the summer of 2007, several attempts have been made to settle the discord among Hamas, Fatah and their respective entities (Gaza and the West Bank), but none have succeeded, for a variety of reasons. Hamas and Fatah do not acknowledge each other’s legitimate right to govern. Hamas asserts that its legitimacy is derived from the elections it won in 2006; it therefore considers its continued hold on Gaza a main priority and places no trust in Fatah’s ceding more authority than it did during the failed unity government of 2007. Fatah, for its part, considers the PA entity in the West Bank a manifestation of legitimate politics, since it was derived from the PLO, while it perceives the Gaza entity as illegitimate since it was brought about through a coup d’état (*inqilab*). Thus, Fatah demands that Hamas end its control over the Gaza Strip and surrender to the PA in Ramallah.

While both sides hold fast to their perceived superior legitimacy, an agreement between Fatah and Hamas was signed in Doha in February 2012.<sup>16</sup> However, relations between the two parties remain fragile. Fear and mistrust persist, and profound political and ideological differences have not been overcome. Mutual suspicion leads them to wrangle over small and large concerns, rather than seek common ground on the core issues: the political program, elections, reform of the PLO, conditions for a unity government, the security apparatus and the future of armed resistance.

To understand Hamas’s difficulties in reaching the reconciliation, it is important not only to explore the movement’s political and ideological tenets, but also to

consider Fatah's approach and the wider regional politics that surround the issue. PA President Mahmoud Abbas, for his part, considers a settlement of the internal conflict crucial. Not only would it increase Fatah's and the PA's sphere of influence and reinforce his authority; Abbas also seems to hope that a united Palestinian position would likely help achieve success in negotiations with Israel. Over the past eight years, he has been running an increasingly weakened government in the West Bank, reliant on donor support and tax revenues collected (and often withheld) by Israel, undermined politically and economically by lack of progress in the so-called peace process. (It should be noted in this context that Israel has warned Abbas not to reconcile with Hamas, most likely to prevent a stronger Palestinian stance.) On another level, the reconciliation would be desirable, since a divided Palestinian stand might jeopardize international and Arab recognition of the PLO as the sole representative of all Palestinians.

Fundamental disagreements over the so-called peace process pose a further obstacle to true reconciliation. While Fatah still favors an approach to the peace process that adopts negotiations and diplomacy, recognizes Israel, and accepts a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, Hamas considers all forms of resistance legitimate and rejects the three infamous conditions of the Quartet: recognize the state of Israel, honor previous diplomatic agreements and renounce violence.

Regarding the formation of an interim government with negotiated and appointed positions, in order to prepare for elections, the two parties have fundamentally different aspirations. Fatah hopes that such a government, headed by Abbas and reflecting his political program, will bring Gaza

back under its authority. Hamas hopes that, by entering such a government, it will be spared the conditions of the Quartet, escape the trials of international sanctions, evade an Israeli veto on its participation in governance and elections, and prevent future Israeli attacks on Gaza without reducing its own military capabilities. Furthermore, a unity government would release the movement from the financial burden of paying salaries for over 50,000 civil servants amid deteriorating economic and social conditions. Thus, several agreements on holding elections and forming a new government have faltered over Abbas's insistence that any interim government serve for only three months, a condition Hamas has rejected as providing insufficient time for running an effective campaign. From a pragmatic point of view, any transitional government would, due to the large number of inherent difficulties, be unable to deal with even the most pressing issues and would therefore be doomed to managing the split rather than ending it.

Regarding security, Fatah seeks to extend Ramallah's model, based on the Dayton plan,<sup>17</sup> which includes the Gaza Strip and entails the dismantling of security and military bodies created by Hamas, particularly its military wing, the Al-Qassam Brigades. Hamas demands that the Gaza Strip be allowed to keep its security and military apparatuses, in keeping with the "Hezbollah model," as long as Israel continues to attack its citizens. Furthermore, Hamas stresses that Ramallah's security setup must be reformed so as to serve the security of Palestinians rather than that of Israel. Realistically, without reaching a shared political platform, the security question will continue to be a contentious issue.

Concerning the PLO, Fatah considers it to be the guardian of the PA, the legiti-

mate host of national discourse, and the internationally recognized representative body for all Palestinians. Fatah acknowledges that the PLO must be reformed, but only in a manner that would allow Fatah to control the reform process. Hamas, on the other hand, considers the PLO to be a body that belongs to the past, an illegitimate, aging organization that does not respond to the current conditions in Palestine. Since its various structures (Palestinian National Council or the PLO parliament, the Executive Committee and the chairmanship) are not democratically managed, it is no longer representative of all Palestinians, particularly since it excludes the Islamic factions, such as Islamic Jihad and Hamas, even though it won the 2006 PLC elections.<sup>18</sup> Hamas has raised this issue throughout the reconciliation talks, stressing that an agreement on the reform of PLO structures and on holding elections for a new Palestine National Council is an essential prerequisite for settling the other core issues under contention. In fact, without genuine reform, the PLO's role and mandate will remain disputed by a large segment of Palestinians, including Hamas and other Islamists.

### **REJECTING THE ELECTIONS**

For Fatah, the first step towards reaching a settlement is to hold legislative, presidential and PNC elections. But, due to the events that followed the 2006 elections, Hamas is sceptical. It maintains that the rules governing Palestinian politics in the past are no longer valid; new sets of guidelines are needed in order to form an interim government, deal with security, reform the PLO, and hold new PNC elections. Fatah disagrees.

The Hamas leadership is convinced that Israel and the United States will

allow Hamas to participate in elections only when they are certain that the movement will lose.<sup>19</sup> The oppressive measures directed against Hamas cadres and institutions in the West Bank, not only by Israel but also by the PA's security forces, are a serious concern for the movement. Hamas's Khalid Solaiman has stated: "In compliance with Israel's policy to consider Hamas's PLC bloc Change and Reform a terrorist group, I was arrested twice and my office was closed. The Israeli message is that Hamas is illegal and its institutions must be closed, its activities banned and its representatives arrested."<sup>20</sup> If the elections were held under such conditions, Hamas fears that many Palestinians would be reluctant to vote for the movement's candidates, because they could be arrested after being elected. Another Hamas observer maintains, "In the past few years, Hamas's [governance] structure (Shura Councils) in the West Bank has been severely weakened, even dissolved, due to the repressive measures by the Palestinian Authority."<sup>21</sup> Yet, it is worth noting that Fatah likewise maintains that pro-Fatah institutions in Gaza have been closed and Fatah affiliates arrested and harassed. Hence, if elections were to take place in Gaza, the Fatah candidates would probably not be allowed to run their campaigns freely.<sup>22</sup>

Regarding future prospects for elections, Hamas does not expect an easing of the oppressive measures targeting its supporters and institutions in the West Bank. Such a policy concurs with Abbas's approach of granting primacy to security over achieving tangible political gains. Being treated as a security threat, rather than a legitimate group with a different view, will discourage the movement from participating in elections until credible security guarantees are in place. But rather

than seeking a compromise, Fatah accuses Hamas of stalling the elections and maintaining sole control in Gaza. Hamas, it claims, will agree to hold elections only if victory is guaranteed. Hamas, however, states it will accept elections if a number of issues are addressed: its candidates in the West Bank must be allowed to run their campaigns freely; the elections must be free and fair; the Palestinians of East Jerusalem must be included in the elections; and there must be a guarantee that the results will be recognized and respected.<sup>23</sup>

If the elections were to take place without tackling these core issues, one of the four scenarios outlined below would be likely to happen. First, if Hamas were to win the elections for both bodies (PA and the PLO), the future prospects for the movement would still not be promising. It is likely that Israel's oppression would be relentless, the international boycott prolonged, and the internal siege by Fatah maintained. The result: internal division would be magnified.

If Hamas were to lose the elections for both bodies, the movement would be forced to abide by the will of the majority, having to follow whatever decisions are made by the winners, including measures that might weaken the movement's governance structure in the Gaza Strip. Such an election loss would be viewed as a signal that the movement had failed to maintain the popular support it achieved in 2006 and had lost its popular and constitutional legitimacy. Consequently, it could more easily be targeted by the new authority, an intolerable prospect for the movement. To avoid such a scenario, Hamas would probably insist that the Gaza Strip be given a special status in any future settlement, with the existing structures (the paramilitary and security configurations) kept under the

control of Hamas's military wing, the Al-Qassam Brigades.<sup>24</sup>

A third outcome is possible: Hamas wins the election for the PA but loses its bid for the PLO. This scenario would not involve any change in the state of affairs since 2006, characterized by deep animosity and divisions between the two sides. It is also the most likely outcome. Finally, Hamas could lose the elections for the PA and win in the PLO. In this case, a Hamas-led PLO would in all likelihood be branded a terrorist group unfit to lead the PA. This situation would deepen the already existing division.

As both Fatah and Hamas want to achieve their respective goals while being viewed as taking part in a reconciliation process, they are encountering challenges to their approaches. These challenges stem from years of mistrust and deep political and ideological differences on such issues as the formation of an interim government, security, reform of the PLO and elections. Fatah wants to continue its control over the PLO and the PA, while Hamas insists on a type of unity that would allow it to participate first and take over later. Hence, Fatah needs to gain the support of all other Palestinian parties for its leadership of the PA and the PLO, and it bases its approach on the assumption that peace talks with Israel will resume. Hamas wants to gain Arab and international recognition and legitimacy, and it seeks to delay national unity until it has secured more regional backing from the post-Arab-Spring governments and parties. Overall, neither approach is convincing. A genuine settlement can only happen in response to the national interest, not as the manifestation of a particular gain for one party.

In this context, it is important to consider the role of actors such as Israel, the United States and the Quartet, as well

as influential regional players. In particular, Israel can influence most, if not all, issues affecting Palestinians; it can control the process of forming a government and simply arrest individuals it disapproves of. By the same token, it can decide whether and when elections are held and influence their outcome, again by simply arresting officials it does not approve of. Israel also has the final say on all security matters, of course. Under the current framework, a credible settlement between Fatah and Hamas cannot be realized without Israel's approval, and Israel will not allow the reconciliation process to proceed without both groups' full commitment to agreements signed in the past. As long as Fatah and Hamas fail to agree on the key national goals, namely liberation and sovereignty, the Palestinian response to the Israeli challenge will remain weak.

However, these issues are at the core of the Palestinians people's national interest, and they must trump the narrow goals of either party if true reconciliation is to be achieved. The alternative is continued occupation, expansion of settlements and fragmentation of the homeland — developments that will further undermine the prospects for internal unity. Reconciliation is possible only when it is part of a package that not only includes an agreement between the two Palestinian sides, but also revives a credible peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, a prospect that is still lacking.

## CONCLUSION

In the wake of the Arab revolts, the distrust between Hamas and Fatah has deepened. While Hamas has gained substantial political support from new regional allies such as Egypt (until the ousting of Morsi), Tunisia, Qatar and Turkey, it has

lost part of its resistance-based support from Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, a loss that its new allies cannot fully replace. The new allies have neither come out strongly against Israel, nor pushed Hamas and Fatah closer to reconciliation, and neither Hamas nor Fatah seems willing to pay the political price required to reach a settlement.

Thus, at least five main reasons for the failure to end internal divisions can be identified. Fatah and Hamas disagree fundamentally over the other's legitimacy. Each party not only perceives itself as more legitimate than the other; it also views its rival as an impediment to Palestinian nationhood. They also differ over fundamental issues such as an interim government and elections, the approach to the peace process, security matters and the organization of the PLO. Further, the two entities in the West Bank and Gaza have responded to different constituencies, priorities and challenges and thus developed in very different ways. Furthermore, Israel has over the past six years successfully blocked repeated attempts at reconciliation by setting insurmountable preconditions. Finally, there has been a lack of support for internal Palestinian reconciliation by both past Arab rulers and the new Arab governments.

The hopes that Hamas might have had for the aftermath of the Arab Spring have not been fulfilled. Thus far, the revolts have not brought to power the strong allies the movement had hoped for, allies that might have produced a new regional environment to support a stronger Hamas stance towards Israel, or influence the Palestinian internal power balance. This might have brought Fatah and Hamas a step closer to ending their animosity by making necessary compromises. This leaves both sides and, with them, the entire Palestinian people, further away from independence and liberation.

<sup>1</sup> Hamas has lost its base in Syria, and Khaled Meshal is moving between unstable Egypt and American-influenced Qatar, which has strengthened the power of leaders in Gaza, who have a (relatively) more predictable situation.

<sup>2</sup> See Firas Abu Hilal, "Hamas and Arab Revolts: The Position and the Consequences" (in Arabic, translation by author), Aljazeera online, November 13, 2012, retrieved April 28, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.net/opinions/pages/6e914d15-9589-4b37-9ad3-6a8fb5051bc3>.

<sup>3</sup> Hamas has an external leadership, as well as domestic branches in Gaza, the West Bank, and Israeli jails.

<sup>4</sup> Khaled Meshal cited this figure during a meeting with Hani Almasri and others, and it was reflected in an interview with Hani Almasri, General Director of the Palestinian Center for Policy Research and Strategic Studies, April 8, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> A case in point that has revealed Hamas's anger is the electricity crisis, which prompted Ismail Haniyeh to ask in his weekly address in March 2012: "Is it reasonable that Gaza remains without electricity a year after the revolution in Egypt? Is it reasonable that Gaza remains under blockade a year after the dismissal of the tyrant (Mubarak) regime?" See *Alhayat al-Jadida* newspaper, <http://www.alhayat-j.com/newsite/details.php?opt=2&id=164444&cid=2516>.

<sup>6</sup> See a statement by Mahmoud Al-Zahar, one of Hamas's main leaders in Gaza, at <http://sharkiatoday.com/news/160135>. A similar opinion was reflected by Khalid Solaiman, a PLC representative from the Reform and Change Hamas Parliamentary Bloc, interviewed on December 3, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> These challenges are the following: the difficulties political movements experience when having to transform into political parties and governing agents; Islamists' general lack of a platform, and their inexperience in governing, which makes them inadequately prepared for tackling thorny issues of development and democracy; the ambiguous frames of reference defining the new governments that Islamists are leading, which leaves them with little guidance; the Salafi (Wahhabi and Jihadi) groups that are found in many countries and perceive themselves as the proponents of "authentic" Islam; and finally, the Islamists' inability to differentiate tangibly their political outlook and interests from those of Western countries, particularly the United States, and their tacit alliance with these countries as has been revealed after Morsi was ousted from office. See "Democracy as a Minor Necessity in Hamas's Narrative," in *Islamist Movements and Political Participation in the Middle East: Options before Hamas*, eds. Basem Ezbidi and Are Knudsen (I.B. Tauris, forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> In early 2011, some voices within Hamas, reflecting this view, questioned Abbas's legitimacy and even called for the replacement of the PLO with another representative body.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Khalid Solaiman, December 3, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> On March 5, Abu Marzouq arrived in Tehran on a visit that coincided with a visit by the Syrian foreign minister. Credible sources revealed that the aim of this visit was to improve relations with Iran and to mitigate the tension between Hamas and the Syrian regime. Efforts to mend relations with Iran and Hezbollah are currently granted more seriousness by Hamas to offset its rocky relations with the post-Morsi military rule in Egypt.

<sup>12</sup> An interview with Khaled Meshal by CNN reporter Christiane Amanpour, November 22, 2012, <http://warincontext.org/2012/11/22/khaled-meshaal-interview-on-cnn/>.

<sup>13</sup> This view was spelled out in a speech delivered on December 8, 2012, before tens of thousands of supporters in celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of Hamas.

<sup>14</sup> Hamas named the round of clashes that erupted in November 2012 "Operation Stones of Baked Clay" (*hijarat sajl*), a term from a Quranic story that describes how heavenly birds fought infidels in defense of the *kaaba* in the year 570 AD.

<sup>15</sup> Another objective behind Meshal's visit to the "militant" Gaza Strip was his desire to consolidate his standing within the movement prior to the internal elections of Hamas's leadership. This desire was achieved. Ismail Haniyeh described Meshal as the supreme leader of the movement, in response to Meshal's presenting him as Hamas's leader in Gaza. This "pact" served both leaders in the internal elections in March 2013, when Meshal was reconfirmed as head of the politburo, the executive body of Hamas; Haniyeh was elected as his first deputy; and Ahmad Bahar, also from Gaza, was elected head of the Shura Council, the highest legislative body within Hamas, which consists of 60 members. These elections also granted more power to the latter body by assigning it the task of overseeing the overall function of the politburo and requiring its consultation on all critical decisions taken by the movement. It is worth noting here that, in these elections, the candidates

that were directly backed by the military wing (Al-Qassam Brigades) secured one-third of the seats in the Politburo. These results emphasize that Hamas in Gaza is a formidable voice within the movement.

<sup>16</sup> This reconciliation agreement came about partly because of the revolts in the region and due to protests in the occupied territories calling for an end to the split. The agreement outlined the formation of an interim government of technocrats with Abbas as prime minister, to prepare for elections to the presidency, the Palestinian Legislative Council, and the PLO's Palestine National Council.

<sup>17</sup> The PA has adopted a security design that was put together in 2007 by the retired American general Kenneth Dayton, stipulating that Palestinian security personnel attain specific "professional" training on security matters and maintain ties with their Israeli counterparts on security matters. See Muhsen Saleh, "The Dilemma of Palestinian Security Forces in the West Bank," <http://aljazeera.net/opinions/pages/b6abf276-8902-4293-a36c-b32130d6758f>.

<sup>18</sup> Hamas conducts its own undisclosed surveys inside the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as outside, to assess its popularity. Several Hamas affiliates in the West Bank revealed that such surveys have been showing that Islamists would easily secure over half of the 765 PNC members.

<sup>19</sup> This view was reiterated by all Hamas members and other analysts who were interviewed for this article.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Khalid Solaiman in December 3, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Hashem Al-Masri, a specialist in the Islamic movements, April 5 2013.

<sup>22</sup> See the annual reports issued by the Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR) since 2007, which regularly documented political arrests and harassment in the West Bank and Gaza Strip committed by both parties.

<sup>23</sup> This view was reiterated by all Hamas members who were interviewed for this article.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Sofian Abu Zayde, March 3, 2013. Zayde is a member of the Fatah Revolutionary Council from Gaza and currently resides in Ramallah.