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**PALESTINE UNITY CAN HELP THE PEACE PROCESS**

**BY**



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The 23 April 2014 reconciliation agreement between Hamas and the PLO has provoked sharp initial negative reactions in Israel. But much will depend on how the agreement is implemented, the evolving political dynamics within Israel, and the role of external players. The formation of the unity government on 2 June 2014 is a positive development, given the failure of previous efforts at unity. The unity agreement has the potential to help move the peace process forward but a key factor is the transformation of Hamas from a violent extremist group into a legitimate political player in the peace process.

### **Long road to peace**

The Israel–Palestinian conflict has gone through a long and tortuous path since the 1967 war, when Israel occupied a large swath of territory, including Palestine. This resulted in Israel having to administer a large and growing Palestinian population who resisted the occupation. The 1973 war led to the 1978 Camp David accords.

The Camp David “framework for peace” document A envisaged autonomy only for the Palestinians, and an Israel-Jordan peace treaty that would take into account the interests of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. Document B resulted in the Israel-Egypt peace agreement of 1979, in which Israel vacated the Sinai while Egypt agreed to demilitarize it. This agreement has endured over the years, despite political upheavals in Egypt.

Israel negotiated separately with Egypt and Jordan and avoided direct negotiations with the Palestinians, fearing that this would give legitimacy to their claims. An Israel-Jordan peace treaty was signed in 1994, after successful negotiations between both sides. This treaty settled land and water issues and provided for cooperation in trade and tourism. In the north, Israel and Syria were able to agree on withdrawal of Israeli forces from part of the Golan which the former had occupied during the 1973 war, with a UN Disengagement Observer Force being interposed to maintain peace.

## **Frustration and violence in Palestine**

Israeli occupation of Palestine, with increasing repression and Palestinian resistance and frustration, culminated in a prolonged period of unrest, the “Intifada” which started in 1987, and the birth of Hamas, an Islamic Sunni organization, in 1988. The Oslo agreements of 1993, between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), were a first step in the Oslo peace process to reach a final settlement in five years’ time. This “two state” solution was to create a Palestinian state on 22% of the territory controlled by Israel on the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. The Oslo process failed and a second “Intifada” broke out in 2000, escalating into a conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in 2004, after which Israel disengaged from Gaza, removing settlers. Hamas won the 2006 elections in Gaza, and Israel broke off negotiations with the Palestinian government.

Tensions among the Palestinians escalated into an armed conflict between Hamas and the PLO in Gaza in 2007, resulting in Hamas taking control of Gaza. Iran emerged as a major supporter of Hamas. Pressured by the US, direct talks between Israel and the PLO started in 2010, to work out a basis for a two state solution. The fierce opposition of Hamas stalled progress despite the mainstream elements in the PLO showing commitment to a negotiated solution. In July 2013, the US again attempted to revive the stalled negotiations, but these failed by April 2014. Meanwhile, Israel has accelerated the settlement activity.

Fatah and Hamas have signed several peace agreements since the armed conflict in 2007, which split the Palestinian government in two parts- Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority (PA) based in Ramallah and Hamas based in Gaza. The Mecca agreement of February 2007 ended the armed conflict. In May 2011, a reconciliation agreement was signed in Cairo, but it failed due to the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. Again in February 2012, an agreement was concluded in Doha, but this broke down. Another agreement was signed in Cairo in May 2012. The latest Gaza agreement of 23 April 2014 may be seen as yet another effort to reconcile Hamas and Fatah and proceed with the long overdue Presidential and Parliamentary elections.

The reasons for Hamas signing the new agreement could be attributed to it facing an acute financial crisis, and the inability to meet the costs of running Gaza. Funding from Iran has

been cut due to Hamas (a Sunni organization) sending fighters from Palestinian camps against the Assad regime. The removal of the Muslim Brotherhood dominated government in Egypt has cut off another source of funding and support.

Hamas follows the principles of Sunni Islamic fundamentalism. In July 2009, Khaled Meshal, Hamas's political bureau chief, said the organization was willing to cooperate with "a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict which included a Palestinian state based on 1967 borders", provided that Palestinian refugees hold the right to return to Israel and that East Jerusalem be the new nation's capital. Hamas's military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, has launched attacks on Israel, against both civilian and military targets including rocket attacks and suicide bombings.

### **Recent developments**

PA President Mahmoud Abbas has stated that the latest agreement did not contradict their commitment to peace with Israel on the basis of a two-state solution, and that any unity government would recognize Israel, be non-violent, and bound to previous PLO agreements.

Intense negotiations have led to Fatah and Hamas reaching agreement on the formation of an interim government on 2 June, of 17 ministers led by Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah, a technocrat. Two Ministries were handed over from Hamas to technocrats. This marks an important step towards holding the long delayed legislative elections in 2015. An Egyptian led Arab security committee is to review the posts of some 20,000 Hamas security personnel. Another 20,000 government employees appointed by Hamas will be reviewed before being added to the government payroll. Such measures should give some comfort to those who believe that Hamas, freed from the burden of running Gaza, will focus on building up its capacity for armed struggle.

International reaction has been overwhelmingly favourable. The EU has said it welcomes unity and would continue funding any government that meets the conditions for aid: recognition of Israel, endorsement of former accords and abstaining from violence. US Secretary of State

John Kerry stated after a phone call to PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas that the Obama Administration would judge the Palestinian unity government by its deeds. Recognition would depend on the new regime recognizing Israel, upholding previously-signed Palestinian international undertakings and abstaining from terrorism and other violence. Abbas assured the Secretary that the new Palestinian ministers were appointed by him and they would comply with his wishes and policies.

India has supported the unity government and has also noted the commitment of the unity government to the obligations assumed by Palestine in the peace process with Israel. Similar expressions of support have come from the Arab League, China, Russia, Turkey, Switzerland, the UN and many other countries. Iran has significantly not so far commented on the unity government which brings Hamas closer to the Arabs.

### **Israeli reactions and avoiding worse options**

The Israeli government's reaction to the recent agreement has been to call off negotiations and impose financial restrictions on the PA. Israeli objects to Hamas's participation in the PA while maintaining its 1988 Charter, and the PA filing unilateral applications to join UN treaties. Israel has called on the world to shun the new government over its partnership with a terrorist organization. Israel has already blocked movement of Palestinian Ministers from Gaza to the West Bank for the swearing in, and has threatened to prevent the elections if Hamas participates.

The breakdown of the peace process puts at risk the "two state" solution envisaged by the Oslo accords. The deal offered to Israel is a secure state within 78% of Palestine with recognition by the PLO and Arab states and even the prospect of Hamas coming on board. The alternative would be a "one state" solution in which Israel would have a large Palestinian population which would soon become a majority, demanding equal rights. An apartheid system of unequal rights would make Israel an international outcast.

Yet another option is a "three state" solution with a separate entity in Gaza. This option has little support within the international community, but has been suggested by some neo-conservative strategists in the US. The status and degree of sovereignty of entities in Gaza and

the West Bank in relation to Egypt and Jordan remain to be explored. The present situation is considered by some to approximate to this.

There are serious demographic challenges to Israel and moral, political, and strategic dangers in preserving the territorial status quo. Israel cannot remain a majority Jewish, democratic state, by indefinitely controlling the Palestinian territories. Only a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict can prevent this existential danger from becoming a reality. By April 2012, Jews now constitute a minority of the people accounting for 5.9 million of the total 12 million people living under Israeli rule. This demographic imbalance will increase further in future.

Other dangers lie in future Palestinian uprisings giving birth to more militant and dangerous groups drawing support from networks which are proliferating in the region, including Al Qaeda and the ISIS. This would not be in Israel's interests and undermine stability and peace in the region.

Therefore, the best course of action would be for Israel to resume the negotiations with the PA, put pressure on Hamas to stop armed action against Israel, and participate in the political process. Hamas should agree to suspend the portions of its charter offensive to Israel. A unified Palestinian government with an elected parliament and president would be more effective in ensuring peace. Israel has much to gain from the resumption of the peace process.

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