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Rough Times ahead for Hamas Politics Under the Influence of Post- Mursi Egypt and the Palestinian Divide

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Roots and Consequences of the Hamas-Fatah Division

Hamas and Fatah have been rivals ever since Hamas was founded during the first Intifada and became a popular organization within the Palestinian arena. After Hamas' unexpected victory in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections differences between the two factions sharpened and tensions escalated. On the one hand, Fatah was not willing to fully recognize Hamas' victory and refused to transfer power to the Islamists, especially in the security sector. On the other hand, Israel and the international community did not recognize the Hamas government and boycotted the Palestinian Authority (PA) as long as Hamas would not accept the principles of the Middle East Quartet: recognizing the state of Israel, ending terror attacks and committing to all prior agreements between Israel and the PA. As it was impossible for Hamas to agree to these conditions without losing legitimacy in the Palestinian population and in the Arab world, international financial support was halted and the government was confronted with a severe financial crisis.

Although Hamas and Fatah undertook several attempts after the forming of the Hamas led-Government 2006 to overcome their difficulties and even briefly formed

a unity government in 2007, mistrust on both sides remained high and violent tensions rose between the two factions. These tensions finally led to a bloody internecine conflict between the two, culminating in the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007 and an all but complete shut-down of Hamas activities in the West Bank. Since that time, the Palestinian population has been suffering the consequences of the complete political and territorial split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Several attempts for reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas have failed and the Palestinian division has become ever more entrenched. Today, parallel governing structures exist in the West Bank and Gaza and both factions separately levy taxes and have their own fiscal structures. Hence overcoming the Palestinian division is not only difficult in political but also in structural terms.

Regional Alliances and Palestinian Reconciliation Efforts

In August 2013, Palestinian politicians from Fatah and Hamas estimated the chances for a successful Palestinian reconciliation in the near future as being close to zero. Members of the two Palestinian factions take very different positions regarding reconciliation. After the Islamists' backlash in Egypt, Fatah has seen its position strengthened within the Palestinian arena. This became especially clear when Azzam al-Ahmad, head of Fatah's reconciliation delegation, recently held a speech threatening Hamas and warned of strong actions against them in the Gaza Strip. Members of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) from Fatah predicted that there will be a popular uprising against Hamas in Gaza soon, mentioning November 11, 2013, the day of death of PLO-leader Yassir Arafat, as the reference date for the

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possible rebellion. These Fatah-PLC members referred to Mohammad Dahlan and to the Tamarod movement as main actors who could be involved in that rebellion. Mohammad Dahlan, an ex-senior Fatah official, formerly responsible for one of the PA security forces in Gaza, was accused of being behind the bloody fight against Hamas in June 2007. According to Fatah PLC members he still has an important power base in Gaza. The Tamarod movement, an anti-Islamist grassroots-movement that has recently emerged in Egypt and organized public opposition against Muhammad Mursi, inspired people in Gaza and led to the emergence of Tamarod activism there as well. Allegedly trained by Egyptian intelligence and security forces, Palestinian Tamarod activists call for public demonstrations against Hamas in Gaza.

Unsurprisingly, Hamas evaluates the situation in Gaza very differently. Although senior Hamas member Yahya Mousa admitted that there are Tamarod activists in the West Bank and Gaza, he seemed to be convinced that the groups will not have any influence in Gaza, because the Palestinian people support the political system in the Gaza Strip. Yet, Mousa also acknowledged that Hamas security services detained some of the Tamarod activists. Hamas members continuously claim that there will neither be an uprising in Gaza nor a military takeover by Fatah. Still, Hamas politicians admit that the organization is going through rough times. Only a few weeks after the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas' Prime Minister in Gaza, offered all Palestinian factions, including Fatah, the opportunity to form a joint government that would rule Gaza until a national unity government could be achieved, underlining that Hamas would be ready for dialogue about national reconciliation. Yet,

some members of the current Palestinian Legislative Council from Hamas know that chances for reconciliation in the near future are very low.

Looking at the recent regional developments in the Middle East, in particular the political situation in Egypt, it becomes clear that regional circumstances and alliances are of utmost importance for the Palestinian reconciliation process. They can function as a driving force for reconciliation, or even become the main obstacle to it. When the Muslim Brotherhood's Muhammad Mursi was elected president in 2012, Hamas subsequently saw itself in a superior power position towards Fatah, since it is closely linked with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in ideological and political matters. Activists from the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in 1928, helped give birth to Hamas. Muslim Brotherhood activists have been operating in Palestine since the 1940s. Until the beginning of the first Intifada in 1987, however, the Palestinian Muslim Brothers were not involved in politics. They rather engaged in education and welfare projects with the goal to educate the society in an Islamic way. At that time, to establish an Islamic state was not the aim of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood activists. They rather argued that the Islamic education of the society was to be achieved before an Islamic state could be established. With the outbreak of the first Intifada, the stance of the Muslim Brothers changed and they decided to participate in the Palestinian uprising. Hence, Hamas was founded as a branch of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. The founding of Hamas contained the following advantages for the Muslim Brotherhood: if Hamas' political engagement in the Palestinian uprising was successful, Hamas could be declared as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. If it was not suc-

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cessful, the Muslim Brotherhood organization would not have been put in danger. When Hamas issued its Charter in 1988, which is today rather to be understood as an historical document without any current political implications, it announced its affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood already in the second paragraph.

Bearing the history of Hamas in mind, it becomes clear why Hamas was enthusiastic when President Mursi came to power. Although Mursi did not meet all of Hamas' expectations, e.g. the establishment of a Free Trade Agreement between Gaza and Egypt, Hamas was able to use Rafah as a gateway to the Arab world. Even though the Mursi-government had closed more than 200 of Hamas' tunnels at Rafah border, trade via the tunnels was tolerated to such an extent that some pressure from the Israeli-imposed blockade was relieved. The border was frequently opened to travelers to and from Gaza. These improvements in addition to the electoral victories of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region strengthened Hamas. President Mursi intensified Egyptian-Hamas relations and officially welcomed Hamas leaders in Cairo. Egypt continued to play an important role as a mediator between Hamas and Fatah, but also between Israel and Gaza's different political factions during and after the 2012 Gaza war, the so called operation "Pillar of Defense".

After President Mursi's fall, Hamas is sailing stormy waters. The Egyptian military, which is hostile towards the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and its affiliates regained power in Cairo. Furthermore, during Mursi's presidency, Hamas closed ranks with the Muslim Brotherhood. At the same time, the Palestinian organization disassociated from its former allies Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah after it has been close-

ly linked with them in the so called axis of resistance for many years as the only Sunni actor. Damascus had hosted Hamas' Political Bureau, Iran was Hamas' most important financier and large-scale weapons supplier since the organization was founded, and Hamas and Hezbollah were closely co-operating in military and political affairs.

After the uprising in Syria started, Hamas did not side with the Assad regime but rather tried to take a mediating position between Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian opposition. After the conflict intensified Hamas started to support the Syrian opposition. Consequently, the relationship between the Assad regime and Hamas continuously deteriorated until the Hamas leadership left for Doha and Cairo in the first half of 2012. Iran did not agree with Hamas' position towards Syria and crucially reduced its financial support for the Palestinian organization. However, Iran's financial support has never completely stopped, it only remained on a very low level during this period. Instead, Hamas received large-scale funding and economic investment from Qatar. However, Qatar does not supply Hamas with weapons and the Gulf monarchy's new Emir Tamim bin Hamad takes a less supportive stance towards Hamas than his predecessor. Hence, Hamas is in a very difficult situation at the moment. It has lost its Egyptian ally and now attempts to re-establish its relationship with Iran. Especially its military wing, the Qassam Brigades, was concerned over Hamas' withdrawal from Syria and the strained relations with Iran because of the reduction in military support. Also, Mahmoud al-Zahar, one of Hamas' leading figures in Gaza, is a proponent of the strategic alliance with Iran and calling for re-establishing the relationship.

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Weakened after the Islamists' backlash in Egypt and faced with a possible public unrest in Gaza, Prime Minister Haniyeh has been trying to renew the dialogue with Fatah. However, the relationship between Fatah and Hamas is at a low. Fatah officials today accuse Hamas openly of having interfered within internal Egyptian matters during the bloody revolts between President Mursi's supporters and opponents. Fatah also clarifies that it would be Hamas who has to make concessions for reconciliation now and that joining the Palestinian umbrella, i.e. the PLO, is the only way for Hamas to get protection. Although Hamas Prime Minister Haniyeh has invited all Palestinian factions to join the Gaza government, other Hamas sources are sure that Fatah and Hamas are far from reconciliation. They highlight that Hamas wants to achieve reconciliation through elections but Fatah is not ready yet. They also emphasize that powerful external actors such as the United States, Israel, and the European Union as well as Iran are against reconciliation which contributed to the deterioration of the Fatah-Hamas-relationship.

Implications for the Current Israeli-Palestinian Peace Talks

After more than three years, direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians have resumed in August 2013. The US administration has strongly promoted the new round of talks between the Israeli government and Mahmud Abbas, who represents the Palestinian side. However, Hamas and other Palestinian factions have rejected the talks. They stress that Fatah has achieved nothing for the Palestinian people during 20 years of negotiations and criticize that Abbas has dropped the main conditions, such as a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders as the baseline or the freeze of Israeli settlement activi-

ties. They additionally claim that Abbas does not enjoy the legitimacy to hold any negotiations as his term has expired three years ago. Hamas officials make clear that they have reached much more for the Palestinian cause than Fatah without being engaged in negotiations, e.g. the release of more than 1.000 detainees from Israeli prisons in exchange for the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. They also underline their agreement to a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and to a long-term truce with Israel at least for 20 years on the condition of having East Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital, the return of the Palestinian refugees and the release of the detainees. Yet Hamas is not ready to recognize Israel.

One can question how peace with Israel can be achieved if Mahmud Abbas does not speak for all Palestinian factions and people. He does not only face criticism from Hamas and Islamic Jihad but also from other factions within the PLO and even his own party, as well as the general Palestinian public. Even if Abbas and Israel reach a peace treaty, not all Palestinians would support it. Hence, the unsolved question of Palestinian reconciliation is a massive obstacle to a peaceful solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. All Palestinian factions, Israel, and the international community should strongly promote Palestinian reconciliation instead of remaining caught within power struggles or strategic alliances. Otherwise, it will be more than difficult to achieve results that could at least be implicitly accepted by all Palestinian factions and to reach genuine progress in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

The views expressed by the author do not necessarily reflect the position of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.