

NOREF Report

Hamas's leadership struggle and the prospects for Palestinian reconciliation

Nicolas Pelham

Executive summary

When the West Bank and Gaza first split between two rival Palestinian governments in 2007, Western governments promised to turn the West Bank under President Mahmoud Abbas, their Fatah protégé, into a model state and reduce Gaza under its Islamist rulers, Hamas, to a pariah. Almost five years on, the tables have turned. While the West Bank slips into economic and political crisis, Gaza is fast reviving. Abbas finds himself bereft of a political horizon for achieving a two-state settlement and the state-building experiment of his prime minister, Salam Fayyad, has reached an impasse. Gaza's economy, by contrast, has grown strongly under Prime Minister Ismail Haniya, who is experiencing a wave of increasing popularity, as Hamas looks to tie the enclave ever more closely to the political economies of North Africa, where the Arab awakening is bringing affiliated Islamist movements to power.

A recent agreement signed in the Qatari capital, Doha, between Abbas and Hamas's exiled leader, Khalid Meshal, is intended to heal the split between Palestine's two halves. Under the agreement, the separate governments governing Gaza and the West Bank would be replaced by a single technocratic government under Abbas, which is a radical about-turn on the part of the exiled Hamas leadership that Hamas politicians in Gaza find difficult to swallow. For its own reasons, Israel too rejects the agreement. With so many previous attempts at intra-Palestinian reconciliation ending in failure and so many obstacles dogging this latest round, the prospects for the Doha agreement remain bleak, but not beyond the realm of the possible.

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The tables have turned on Western efforts to turn the West Bank, Palestine's hilly half, into a shining model of Palestinian statehood, and Gaza, the coastal enclave ruled by stubborn Islamists, into a contrasting backwater of misery.

In the West Bank, plummeting externally raised revenues have stymied the drive of the Palestinian Authority (PA) for sustainability. Where Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu promised economic peace, today he threatens sanctions and plays hard-to-get with the Palestinian customs revenues Israel collects. Europe is too fiscally spent to maintain funding levels – its aid is down 40% in two years, and the will to maintain even these lower levels is beset with doubts over whether its investment in a Palestinian state will ever see fruition. Angered by President Mahmoud Abbas's pursuit of a seat in the United Nations (UN), the U.S. Congress has withheld two-thirds of its \$600 million support programme.

Strapped for funds, the PA's prime minister, Salam Fayyad, who was once the darling of Western donors, has borrowed to the hilt from the banks and owes hundreds of millions to the private sector. The resignation of three ministers on corruption charges has tarnished his hard-earned reputation for financial propriety. Anticipated growth has halved as donors retrench.

The loss of a political horizon is further crippling the ailing state-building effort. Abbas's efforts to negotiate a viable two-state settlement have collapsed, despite the Quartet's fitful efforts at flogging the dying horse. His planned bypass via the UN seems similarly grounded. And the Arab awakening has deprived him of his prime regional patron, Hosni Mubarak, the former Egyptian president.

A clearer political horizon

Gaza under Hamas, by contrast, is fast reviving, sloughing off its economic and political boycott. It has escaped the straitjacket its neighbours strapped it in by burrowing new supply lines to Egypt underground, through which 6,500 tons of smuggled building materials arrive daily, dwarfing imports from Israel, says Hamas's economy

minister, Ala Refati, despite the significant easing of Israel's blockade.

Visitors to Gaza from the West Bank complain that Gaza's new mercantile class drive the latest sports car models, which are yet to reach the West Bank. Dozens of tower blocks are under construction. Samir Huleileh, the CEO of the largest Palestinian company, PADICO, says that, given Gaza's improved prospects and the downturn in the West Bank, his company has shifted investments towards the Hamas-run enclave. While Hamas controls its own southern borders, the West Bank remains riddled with Israeli military checkpoints and restrictions. "We're the ones struggling with Israel's footprint and under siege", says the owner of a once-popular Ramallah cafe, whose turnover has slumped.

As Abbas's political horizons have darkened, Gaza's have also grown brighter. Uprisings across North Africa are propelling Hamas's sister Islamist movements to power, freeing Gaza from the Mubarak-era boycott, and unleashing a wealth of economic and political possibilities. A delegation of Hamas ministers recently returned from Egypt and unveiled plans for formalising the underground traffic with a free-trade zone straddling their common border, doubling the current trade of \$1 billion. Other ministers proposed bolstering Egypt's supply of power and gas to the enclave, ending Gaza's daily blackouts, and opening up transport links to the rest of the region. "Within two years, you'll be able to drive all the way from Gaza to Morocco", one minister told me.

Hamas's foreign policy

The growing affinity between Gaza's government and the rise of its sister movements to the south-west has also hastened Hamas's shift from the Iranian-Syrian axis to the Sunni Arab fold, where Gaza's Islamists, with their close ties to Egypt, always felt more comfortable. Tellingly, the first official visit by the Gaza prime minister, Ismail Haniya, after Egypt lifted its travel ban on Hamas politicians was to North Africa and Turkey, not Hamas's Iranian or Syrian patrons. On his second tour, Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, a spiritual reference for the Muslim Brotherhood,

persuaded Haniya to prioritise a visit to Bahrain's king, whose Sunni masters have suppressed a Shia uprising, and postpone an official invitation from Iran's leadership, underscoring the Islamic Republic's loss of its strategic Mediterranean asset and growing isolation at a time of mounting U.S. and Israeli threats. Leaders of states the U.S. considers allies feted Haniya, showering legitimacy on a movement they had hitherto ostracised. "Hamás does not feel alone", a forlorn Fatah official, Hossam Zomlot, said after returning to Gaza for the first time in seven years. "They are part of an Islamist movement of 150 million people which is winning the Arab Spring."

As in Israel, facts on the ground have often trumped pressure from foreign patrons as the determinants of political outcomes. Just as control of the West Bank settlements enabled Israel's religious right to accumulate an asset base from which to assert their influence, so Islamist control of the coastal enclave of Gaza has empowered its leaders to sway decision making within Hamás, the Palestinian polity and even the broader region. At a time when the region's other Islamists are focused on their internal affairs, Gaza's relative growth and stability have allowed Haniya to turn his attention further afield. As he tours the region, he appears increasingly sure-footed, not only as a Hamás or Palestinian leader, but as a regional champion of Islamism's ascendancy.

Once the most introverted and lowly of Hamás's leaders (others used to denigrate him as founder Ahmed Yassin's tea-boy), Haniya is acquiring a personality cult, replete with floor-to-ceiling posters and large crowds of followers. "Sheikh Ismail Haniya has transcended the Palestinian cause and is now speaking in the name of the entire [Arab] nation", oozes a Hamás website, Felasteen al-An. "He has become the conscience of all Muslim Arabs."

Within the movement, Hamás's leaders in Gaza have encroached on the hold of the movement's politburo head, Khalid Meshal, based in exile, eroding what was hitherto his monopoly on diplomatic, military and economic decision making.

Haniya's control over local revenues and his cultivation of a patronage network numbering

over 35,000 government employees has reduced the leverage Meshal enjoyed as the disburser of donor receipts. The integration of Hamás's military wing into the security forces under the control of Haniya's interior minister has divided the loyalties of militants who once looked to Meshal for leadership. Haniya's recent tour of the region at the head of a 27-man delegation; his reception as guest of honour at official banquets in Turkey, Tunisia and Bahrain, among others; and the range of topics discussed – not just Gaza's reconstruction, but also Jerusalem and the parameters of the Arab-Israeli conflict – saw him upstage Khalid Meshal, who, as head of Hamás's politburo, holds the portfolio of diplomatic relations. (Haniya also upstaged Mahmoud Abbas: Tunisia's new government honoured Haniya as its first official visit by a head of state, at a time when Abbas was conducting a simultaneous, but largely ignored tour of Sahel states.) Polls conducted in the West Bank and Gaza emphasised the disparity in their respective support: while Haniya won 25-40%, the number of percentage points Meshal received could be counted on one hand.

The erosion of Meshal's powerbase in Damascus hastened his ebbing status (carefully cultivated by his rivals in Gaza, who led the cry for him to cut himself loose from a Syrian patron who is slaughtering his Sunni subjects). His effective departure from Damascus left him homeless and headquarterless, with office staff strewn across the region. His deputy, Musa Abu Marzouq, relocated to Cairo, from where he edged closer to the Gaza leadership and appeared increasingly independent of Meshal. While Hamás's leadership in Gaza acquired regional reach, Meshal's leadership seemed to atomise. As elsewhere in North Africa, local powerbrokers have increasingly superseded isolated leaders serving foreign agendas.

A fragile reconciliation

Just as Yasser Arafat signed the Oslo Accords in 1993 to retain his relevancy and prevent forces inside Palestine from taking over his leadership, can Meshal's unity deal with Abbas forestall Haniya's challenge for the leadership? Ever since announcing his reconciliation agreement with

Abbas in April last year, Meshal has sought to secure a leadership position inside the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), the organisation representing all Palestinians inside Palestine and across the diaspora, while dislodging Haniya and his ministers from Gaza and replacing them with a technocratic government.

Reeling at Meshal's decision to cast away something that they considered was not his to give, Gaza's leaders have consistently sought to confound his initiative. In an attempt to emphasise the chasm between Abbas's Fatah movement and the Islamists and retain Hamas's specificity, Haniya hailed al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden as the martyred Sheikh and denounced Meshal's efforts to achieve a joint programme based on popular rather than armed resistance as a sell-out of Hamas's commitment to armed resistance and Meshal's tacit acceptance of Abbas's resumption of exploratory talks with Israel. Haniya's officials spoiled confidence-building measures, among other things banning Fatah's 47th anniversary celebrations, preventing a Fatah delegation from the West Bank from entering Gaza to discuss reconciliation and pronouncing the death penalty on collaborators, a prerogative of President Abbas. Haniya also sought to shore up Hamas in Gaza's traditional ties with the Muslim Brotherhood in North Africa to prevent Meshal from establishing a new base in Egypt.

It is tempting to cast the tussle as one between moderates and extremists – between those committed to accommodate the interests of Western powers and the old order, and those who support the impetuous, tempestuous forces unleashed by the Arab upheaval. But as so often in this conflict, the drivers lie less in ideology than in internal power struggles. In times past, Meshal berated Mahmoud Zahar, a Gaza leader, for calling for “an end to martyrdom operations [suicide bombings]”, much as Zahar lampoons Meshal's distance from the armed struggle now. Despite their current rhetoric about the armed struggle, Hamas leaders in Gaza advocated creative interpretations of resistance before Meshal did and assiduously sought to entrench their ceasefire with Israel. As early as 1996 Haniya favoured Hamas's transformation from an underground into a political movement ready to compete in elections.

Unable to implement the deal on the ground, Meshal initially backpedalled in follow-up rounds of reconciliation talks in an attempt to address Gaza's concerns and secure Hamas support. He accepted that Hamas's security forces would remain in situ pending elections and postponed the appointment of an interim government. But Haniya and his Gazan cohorts continued to balk. According to officials present on the sidelines of reconciliation negotiations in Cairo, Meshal was increasingly sidelined in subsequent talks. Abu Marzouq, his deputy, replaced him at the negotiating table, with Zahar placed at his shoulder, whispering in his ear. The backbiting intensified: one leader jibed that Meshal was “not Palestinian” on account of his Jordanian citizenship. Frustrated, Meshal announced he would not be standing for re-election as head of the politburo in Hamas's scheduled internal elections this spring. Hamas leaders in Gaza quickly spoke of a post-Meshal era under Abu Marzouq, in his half-way house in Cairo, or under Haniya, confirming the return of the movement's centre of gravity back to its birthplace, Gaza.

The Doha agreement is perhaps Meshal's final gamble to overcome internal dissent, promoting Abbas as prime minister of a technocratic government both in Gaza and the West Bank. At face value, its prospects do not appear promising. In addition to Israel's condemnation, Hamas's leadership inside Gaza have responded with a torrent of carping. Haniya, Abu Marzouq and Zahar all shunned the signing ceremony, despite being in the vicinity (Mahmoud al-Zahar, a leader of the movement in Gaza, was in Qatar, says a Hamas parliamentarian, and Haniya had been there the day before). A deputy Hamas minister in Gaza questioned Meshal's authority to agree to the deal, accusing him of acting alone, without the consent of the rest of the politburo. Hamas's parliamentarians in both the West Bank and Gaza publicly condemned Meshal for bestowing unprecedented powers on one man, Abbas, rendering him president, prime minister, commander of the armed forces and chairman of the PLO, in seeming violation of Palestine's Basic Law, and berated the elevation of the leader of a political faction, Abbas, to the head of a supposedly “technocratic” government. Meshal, they complained, had anointed an autocrat at a time when the Muslim Brotherhood elsewhere

was spawning democracies. His agreement, they noted, set no date for elections and spoke of forming, not electing, a Palestinian National Council (PNC), the PLO's legislative body.

Yet, as in the Oslo Accords – when Palestinian negotiators from the occupied territories bowed to Arafat's authority despite anger at its vacillatory terms – at least some among Hamas's political leadership inside Gaza might buckle and fall into line. The agreement has powerful sponsors: Qatar, Meshal's new patron, has emerged as the bankroller and, through Al-Jazeera, as the mouthpiece of the Arab awakening, and has promised to use its full financial, political and diplomatic tools to promote it. Western countries that hitherto balked at a unity government that included a blacklisted terrorist organisation have looked favourably on Hamas's approval of a prime minister who complies with their three conditions – recognition of Israel, a denunciation of violence and a commitment to previous agreements. Anxious to present a pluralist moderate face to the outside world, Hamas's parent organisation, the Muslim Brotherhood, is also prodding Hamas to end its absolute rule in Gaza and its debilitating struggle with Fatah. And even Hamas's military wing is in favour, having won a reprieve of a year under the deal before it has to share power in Gaza. Just about the only party sharing the Hamas politicians' condemnation of the unity deal is Israeli prime minister Netanyahu.

From Islam to nationalism

So it might yet be that Meshal makes a comeback and secures the allegiance of his colleagues. While continuing to carp that the deal is illegal, some have already suggested that for the sake of reconciliation they will hear and obey, hopeful that sooner or later he will honour his commitment to step down as head of the politburo.

Where might Meshal head next? Few expect him to depart the political scene. Some in his camp have floated a number of trial balloons, including the creation of a new post for himself as Hamas's *al-murshid al-amm*, or general supervisor, with overarching control of the movement. Just as likely, with seven of the nine politburo members hailing from Gaza, he could look for a place for

himself outside the formal leadership structure. In recent interviews, he has sounded a nationalist rather than Islamist note. Having drawn Hamas out of Syria's orbit, Arab leaders seem better disposed towards him. The Arab League invited him to present its case to the Syrian government. Qatar has promoted his international rehabilitation, escorting him to a royal reception with King Abdullah of Jordan, marking the end of Meshal's 12-year forced exile from the kingdom, albeit with a gritting of royal teeth. One option floated on Hamas websites is for Meshal to assume the post of speaker of a reformulated PNC, the PLO's parliament. Another is to succeed Abbas when the septuagenarian finally steps down.

By publicly negotiating repeated deals with Meshal, Abbas has elevated Meshal to the position of equal, at the same time as he has suppressed or eliminated potential rivals inside his own faction, Fatah, such as Mohammed Dahlan. Moreover, Abbas has consistently said that he would not stand for re-election, and as prime minister of an interim government would be constitutionally prevented from doing so. With the Doha agreement concentrating all Palestine's powers on one person, Abbas's replacement could be a powerful man indeed.

Might Abbas agree to Meshal's deal? Other survivors from the old order, like Morocco's monarch, have looked to co-opting Islamists as their means of riding the wave of discontent precipitated by the Arab awakening. Moreover, having reunited the two halves of his bifurcated realm, Abbas could bow out with his legacy restored.

The obvious losers of Doha's implementation would be the Hamas politicians in Gaza, after the region seemed to be heading their way. While Meshal and Abbas seek to preserve their futures with political deals, they will likely look to Palestinian elections to restore their power. Already they have demanded that Abbas revive the PA's supposedly sovereign elected body, the Palestinian Legislative Council, where they hold the majority, to ratify the president's doubling as prime minister. They have also demanded that the follow-up meeting to the Doha agreement scheduled for February 18th in Cairo sets a date for elections, which the agreement currently leaves

undefined. While obstructing the implementation of other aspects of reconciliation, Haniya's government has already licensed the reopening of the Central Election Commission to Gaza after four years of closure and the resumption of voter registration. Israel's recent spate of detentions of

Hamas's political leaders and parliamentarians in the West Bank suggest that it at least takes the prospect of Hamas's re-election seriously. Whether by Meshal's backroom dealing in Doha or Haniya's electoral plans, the Palestinian Islamists may yet entrench their power.

