

Mideast stage is set for an autumn crisis

John Bell

Reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah has caught many off-guard. In that sense, it reflects its genesis in the Arab revolutions of 2011, which have surprised all in their extent and intensity.

Until these vast changes occurred across the region, Fatah and Hamas were so far apart that no force could bring them together, not even the abstraction of a common Palestinian cause. However, the changes of power and politics in the Arab world today have made their reconciliation inevitable.

The first challenge that both Hamas and Fatah tasted in 2011 was Palestinian. It began with demonstrations against Hamas's excesses in Gaza, and fears of similar events against Fatah in Ramallah. This was followed by a Facebook and street campaign, primarily by youth, demanding reconciliation between the two political fragments of Palestinian society. This theme became more catchy than either a revolt against Palestinian leaders or, for the time being, an end to Israeli occupation.

Two other events were critical for the Palestinians parties to put aside their differences. One was the Syrian revolt, the consequent weakening of the Assad regime, and Hamas's calculation that it must distance itself from Syria.

The second, more important, event is the redirection of Egyptian foreign policy. In harmony with the demands of the Egyptian people, the transitional Egyptian government, influenced also by the now-legal Muslim Brotherhood, has become more open to Hamas and its needs. In an indication of greater confidence and trust between Hamas and the new Egyptian authorities, Hamas signed an Egyptian deal it had previously rejected (and that Fatah had signed) and was rewarded by Egypt by an agreement to reopen the Rafah crossing between Sinai and Gaza.

On the Fatah side, the grand debacle of American policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations left Mahmoud Abbas with nothing to lose by angering the United States, Israel or anyone else by striking a bargain with Hamas. This is part of a larger and critical trend in the Palestinian body politic — the Fatah-driven initiative for recognition of a state in the fall — that could spell serious trouble for Israel.

This vastly changed regional context, the failure of American sponsored talks with Israel, and Palestinian leaders' fears of illegitimacy in the eyes of their people created the pressures and motives for reconciliation. These factors all appear sufficiently durable that this process, unlike past attempts, will likely last even if agreement on security details or possible future negotiations with Israel will be difficult.

The implications for the Palestinian cause and regional politics are significant. First of all, the complaint by Israel and many Westerners that one could not realistically deal with a fragmented Palestinian body politic has been cast aside.

Second, the project by Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to construct a Palestinian state through institution-building and proper governance, including security, ends in August. A new government without Fatah or Hamas members will offer an opportunity to cut a new path for the Palestinians. The implications for Western donors, especially the Europeans and Americans are significant. The confidence in Fayyad was crucial to the flow of funds. If he departs, and with Hamas behind the government, many questions will be asked whether the future can and will be a continuation of past efforts of Palestinian institution-building.

Most importantly, the reconciliation dovetails with the Palestinian drive for recognition of a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders in the UN this fall. Palestinian cohesion will encourage support for such a step. Gaza is effectively within its 1967 borders; the autumn claim will therefore be starkly for the West Bank and East Jerusalem, completing the set, and creating many potential problems for the Israeli status in those areas.

In the short term, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is likely to make hay of the future " Hamas-ization " of the PA and the West Bank, providing him with an excuse to avoid talks with Abbas. This may have resonance among American Republicans, the recently re-elected Canadian government, and in large segments of the Israeli population, but not likely in the rest of the world.

Indeed, the current dynamics likely will set the stage for a confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians in the fall. Israel will not react well to international recognition of a Palestinian state. Without an overpowering American diplomatic intervention that meets the needs of all sides and, indeed, trumps their approaches with its own national security interests, the likelihood of violence and confrontation over the coming months is now high.

Equally, the Palestinian step is a herald of a new foreign policy order in the Middle East, where Egypt, which brokered the deal, aims to open Rafah and has told Washington to recognize a Palestinian state in the fall, is now playing its forgotten role as political godfather of the Arab world.

Neither Israel nor the United States will be able to turn back the clock on this new direction. Some commentators perceive an opportunity for the Americans to think outside the box and act creatively with Hamas now inside the box. However, without coherent, serious engagement that will lead to Palestinian independence, this reconciliation puts both Israel and the United States further behind the curve of the vast and long-term changes in Egypt and the Arab world.

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