Palestinian Unity: Hope and Gloom in the Beach Refugee Camp

By Ramzy Baroud

For years, Palestinian factions have strived for unity, and for years unity has evaded them. But is it possible that following several failed attempts, Fatah and Hamas have finally found that elusive middle ground? And if they have done so, why, to what end, and at what cost?

On April 23, top Fatah and Hamas officials hammered out the final details of the Beach Refugee Camp agreement without any Arab mediation. All major grievances have purportedly been smoothed over, differences have been abridged, and other sensitive issues have been referred to a specialized committee. One of these committees will be entrusted to incorporate Hamas and the Islamic Jihad into the fold of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

A rift lasting seven years has been healed, rejoiced some headlines in Arabic media. Israelis and their media were divided. Some, close to right-wing parties, decried the betrayal of Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas of the ‘peace process’. Others, mostly on the left, pointed the finger at Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for pushing Abbas over the edge –“into Hamas’s arms” per the assessment of Zehava Galon, leader of the left-wing party Meretz.

It is untrue that the rift between Fatah and Hamas goes back to the January 2006 elections, when Hamas won the majority of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), and formed a government. The feud is as old as Hamas itself. The Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, was founded in Gaza with two main
objectives, one direct and the other inferred: to resist the Israeli military occupation at the start of the First Palestinian Intifada in 1987, and to counterbalance the influence of the PLO.

Since then, a staple argument has clouded the judgment of many analysts, most of them sympathetic to Palestinians. They claim that Hamas was the brainchild of the Israeli intelligence Shin Bet, to weaken Palestinian resistance. That too is a misjudgment.

Hamas founders were not the only Palestinians to have a problem with the PLO. The latter group, which represented and spoke on behalf of all Palestinians everywhere, was designated by an Arab League summit in 1974 as the sole and only representative of the Palestinian people. The target of such specific language was not Hamas, for at the time, it didn’t exist. The reference was aimed at other Arab governments who posed as Palestine’s representatives regionally and internationally.

The ‘sole representation’ bit, however, endured even after surpassing its usefulness. Following the Israeli war on Lebanon in 1982 that mainly targeted PLO factions, the leading Palestinian institution, now operating from Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt and other Arab entities, began to flounder. Its message grew more exclusivist and was dominated by a small clique within Fatah, one that was closest to former leader Yasser Arafat.

When the 1987 uprising broke out, it was a different breed of Palestinians who seemed to reflect the new mood on the ground, far away from Tunis and all Arab capitals. New movements included the United National Leadership of the Intifada, although it was quickly coaxed by PLO leadership in exile. Other movements, like Hamas, survived on its own.

That was the original rift, which grew wider with time. When
Arafat signed the Oslo Accords with Israel in 1993, the once unifying character of the ‘sole representative’ of Palestinians began to quickly change. The PLO shrunk into the Palestinian Authority, which governed parts of the West Bank and Gaza under the watchful eye of Israel; and the parliament in exile became the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), a much more restricted parliament at home that was still under occupation. The blurred lines grew between the PLO, the PA and Fatah. It was clear that the liberation project, mounted by the PLO and Fatah in the early 1960’s, became anything but that.

In fact, the whole paradigm was fluctuating at all fronts. ‘Donor countries’ became the true friends of Palestine, and geography suddenly became a maze of confusing classifications of areas A, B and C. The status of Jerusalem was a deferred topic for later discussions; the refugees’ Right of Return was a mere problem that needed to be cleverly and creatively resolved with possible symbolic gestures.

The befuddling peace process has remained in motion, and is likely to continue even after the unity deal. On April 18, former Israel lobbyist and current US peace envoy Martin Indyk returned to the region in a last desperate effort to push both parties to an agreement, any agreement, even one that would simply postpone the US-imposed deadline for a ‘framework agreement’. But little could be done. Netanyahu had no reasons to move forward with the talks, especially being under little or no pressure to do so. Abbas’s only hope that Israel would release a few Palestinian prisoners, from the thousands of prisoners it currently holds, was dashed. He had nothing to show his people by way of an ‘achievement’.

20 some years after Abbas helped facilitate the Oslo agreement, he had nothing to show except for more settlements and a seemingly unbridgeable divide between factions within his own Fatah party, but also with others. With the imminent collapse of the peace process, this time engineered by
Secretary of State John Kerry, Abbas needed an exit, thus the Beach Refugee Camp agreement with Hamas.

The timing for Hamas was devastatingly right. The group, which once represented Palestinian resistance, not just for Islamists, but for others as well, was running out of options. “Hamas is cornered, unpopular at home and boxed in as tightly as ever by both Egypt and Israel,” wrote the Economist on April 26. “Its former foreign patrons, such as Qatar, have been keeping their distance, withholding funds for projects that used to bolster Hamas.”

Indeed, the regional scene was getting too complicated, even for resourceful Hamas, a group that was born into a crisis and is used to navigating its way out of tough political terrains. Despite putting up stiff resistance to Israeli wars and incursions, the group has in recent years been obliged to facilitate hudnas (ceasefires) with Israel, doing its utmost in keeping Gaza’s border with Israel rocket-free. The destruction of the tunnels since the Egyptian army coup against the government of Mohammed Morsi in July had cost the Hamas government nearly 230 million dollars. To manage an economy in a poor region like Gaza is one thing, to sustain it under the harshest of sieges is proving nearly impossible.

As is the case for Abbas’s PA, for Hamas the agreement was necessitated by circumstances other than finding true ground for national unity to combat the Israeli occupation. In fact, the Beach Camp deal would allow Abbas to continue with his part of the peace process, as he will also remain at the helm of the prospected unity government, to be formed within a few weeks from the signing of the agreement. Although Arab governments were not directly involved in bringing both parties together – as was the case in previous agreements in Sana, Mecca, Cairo and Doha – some still hold a sway.

Egypt in particular holds an important key, the Rafah border with Gaza. Hamas is looking for any space to escape the siege
and its own isolation. Egypt knows that well, and has played a clever game to manipulate, and at times, punish Hamas for its closeness to the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Americans and the Israelis have the largest keys to quashing the unity deal. Netanyahu immediately suspended the peace process, as the Hamas-Fatah agreement was a last minute escape route for his government to disown the futile talks, whose collapse is now being blamed on the Palestinians. The Americans are in agreement with Israel, as has always been the case.

Scenes in Gaza tell of much hope and rejoicing, but it is a repeated scene of past agreements that have failed. Sometimes despair and hope go hand in hand. The impoverished place has served as a battlefield for several wars and a continued siege. It is aching for a glimmer of hope.

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