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Palestinian unity hopes dim as Egyptian crisis grows

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The National (Opinion)

March 11, 2013 - 11:00pm

<http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/palestinian-unity-hope...> [1]

March 12, 2013

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Media Outlet: The National

Article Type: Opinion

Date: March 12, 2013

Source Link(s): <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/palestinian-unity-hope...> [1]

The streets of Cairo have been seeing much action of late, as Egyptians rally against the government of President Mohammed Morsi. But even as that country's political landscape teeters, Palestinians have tried - fruitlessly it turns out - to make use of Egypt's reinvigorated role as a broker to reconcile Fatah and Hamas.

Meetings in Cairo last month would have been hailed as a feat were it not for the fact that Palestinians have been witnessing the sad dance carried out for years between the two feuding factions: kiss and make up before exchanging blame.

In one respect, the goodwill gestures of the past few months have paved the way for reconciliation, which would set in motion the chain of events needed to resuscitate the PLO. But as news emerged that Egyptian efforts failed to materialise into an agreement, it became obvious, once again, that too many hurdles must be overcome before the PLO can represent Palestinians in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and abroad.

The signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 secured a diminished role for the PLO somewhat by default; its structure merging with, and subsequently overshadowed by, the PA. As the PA was granted limited governance of the geographic areas allotted to its leadership under the agreement, a fiefdom was created, relegating the PLO to the so-called "peace process".

Palestinians abroad felt neglected and excluded from decision-making, thus becoming increasingly dependent on the countries that hosted them. This push and pull between the PA and the PLO is regularly illustrated in the disagreements between PA President Mahmoud

Abbas, and Tunis-based PLO and Fatah leader Farouq Kaddoumi, over the former's sidelining of the PLO (and also due to divisions within Fatah itself).

But much like the PA, the PLO suffers from a lack of accountability and legitimacy, patrimony and an ailing veteran elite notoriously averse to reform.

Historically the PLO's decision-making has been controlled by Fatah. For years, numerous agreements have called for overhauling the PLO, lately to reflect Hamas's rising stature in Palestinian society, but to no avail. Under political bureau chief Khaled Meshal's rule, Hamas has managed to outshine Fatah, whose declining status is linked to that of Mr Abbas.

With so much centralised power in Mr Abbas's role, some argue that the PLO would need to be headed by a charismatic leader living outside of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip - unhindered by Israeli restrictions or the power struggle between Fatah and Hamas. Rumours have been circulating recently that Mr Meshal himself may be vying for the PLO's top leadership role.

It would be hard to imagine such a scenario unfolding, not least because Hamas is not part of the PLO. Incorporation into the organisation itself may be hard to fathom, as the PLO has long been a secular institution including many left-leaning factions such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), Palestine Liberation Front (PLF) and others. An Islamist figurehead to rule over these factions may be too hard to stomach for some members.

The disagreement between the factions in Cairo last month centred on the details of how and when Palestine National Council elections would take place (the PNC has held only 22 sessions since the PLO was established in 1964).

According to Nayef Hawatmeh, the DFLP's secretary general, "All 12 factions agreed, except Hamas, on the need to have proportional representation for parliament and presidential elections in addition to the Palestinian National Council." Hamas, however, wants to use proportional voting for only 75 per cent of the seats, with the rest chosen via bloc voting.

Either way, the PLO's renewed role depends largely on reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, a substantial obstacle considering the chasm between their political views and visions on how to resist Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. With this deep political and geographic rift between the two, the PLO will not be in a position to negotiate any future settlement with Israel. As this is the PLO's *raison d'être*, the question of relevance and legitimacy again rears its head.

Reconciliation will have to answer to Israeli whims as well. For example, the last time a "government of national accord" was formed, Israel boycotted and withheld funds, effectively strangling the governing body until it collapsed under duress. Just before this latest Cairo meeting, Israeli authorities prevented PFLP leader Abdul Rahim Malouh from leaving the territories to join the reconciliation talks.

Emboldened by regional changes that brought about the strengthening of Islamist regimes in Egypt and Tunis, Hamas has been hailed by many Palestinians as employing a model of resistance that bears fruit while recovering national dignity. As anything less than a decisive defeat is considered a victory for the group, the events of last December saw Hamas emerge victorious, with an enhanced status following its demonstrated ability to hurl rockets inside

Israeli population centres.

The PA has taken a markedly different route, supporting efforts that eschew violence. The PLO has not formally addressed this issue but will most likely have to in the future. In the meantime, Israel remains opposed to any unity government. In fact, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has warned that any such government would effectively spell the end of the two-state solution.

Mr Netanyahu's government has noted in the past that the split within the Palestinian political arena is further evidence that there's no "partner" on the Palestinian side to negotiate with. But as Israel's former foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman stated back in December, "We are ready to move forward, but we do not know who represents the Palestinians - Hamas or Fatah." Neither, it seems, do the Palestinians.

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