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Opinion

Palestinian factions strike a reconciliation deal – will this time be any different?

The new reconciliation deal between rival Palestinian factions could not come at a more critical time. As Palestinians face the Gaza genocide, the political survival of the Palestinian leadership might hinge on finally finding unity.

By Qassam Muaddi July 26, 2024 8

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Palestinians wave the Palestinian flag (Photo: APA Images)

The signing of a new reconciliation deal between rival Palestinian factions in China on Tuesday was received by Palestinians both as a surprise and as unremarkable. It was not the first time that Palestinian leaders had signed an agreement committing to national unity – agreements that have previously and routinely failed to end the political divisions between the parties. But the new agreement signed in China also came completely unannounced, after recent attempts to breach the gaps between the factions during the current war, failed miserably. Is it possible the new agreement reflected a breakthrough?

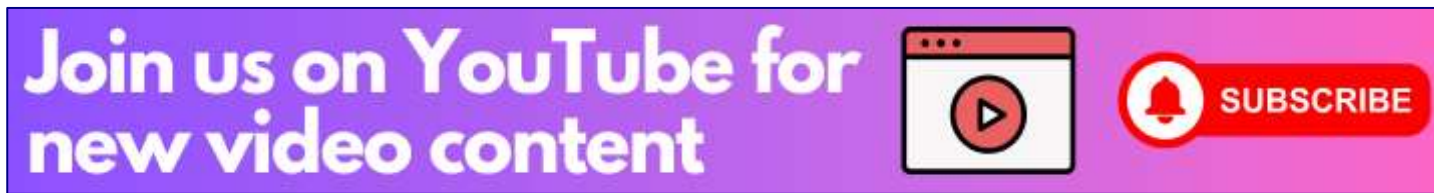
The main point in the new agreement is the commitment by all factions to form a “national consensus government,” which would be in charge of running affairs in Gaza after the war. The agreement affirmed that the government would be chosen in consensus by all factions, which indicates that it would not be formed of representatives of the factions but rather by technocrats, upon whom all the factions agree.

The agreement also states that the final goal of the reconciliation process is a “full national unity within the framework of the PLO.” This means that both Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other factions that emerged during the first and second Intifadas would have to join the PLO, which raises the central question of the PLO’s political program; mainly the commitment to a negotiations process as a way to establishing a Palestinian state, while cooperating in security and business affairs with Israel.

These tensions already exist within the PLO. Some important member factions within the PLO, like the PFLP, fundamentally reject this program, and with the lack of regular elections and deliberations, these disagreements have made the PLO non-functional. With more factions who

oppose the official PLO program joining the PLO, this problem would only increase, and the “full unity” would be little more than a formal one.

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None of this was discussed in China, or included in the reconciliation agreement, which gives Palestinians reasons to be skeptical about this round of reconciliation being any different from the previous ones. However, there is an important new context to the agreement: the aftermath of the war in Gaza.

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, stated that the agreement between Palestinian factions, sponsored by and signed in his country, “treats the administration of Gaza after the war.” The agreement itself included “the commencement of the rebuilding in Gaza,” which shows that this latest agreement is part of the arrangements for the post-war situation, which is in the interest of all Palestinian factions to put in order.

In the end, the latest China-sponsored Palestinian unity agreement might not include anything new, but the conditions under which the agreement was reached are different. The Gaza genocide, the stated Israeli policy of preventing a Palestinian state, and Israeli moves to annex the West Bank all make this moment historically perilous and one that the Palestinian people need a unified leadership to overcome. For Palestinian leaders, including the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, restoring their unity means proving that they are able to live up to the moment. Their political survival might depend on it.

An outdated division

The conflict between the Palestinian Authority, and its Fatah leadership, and Hamas in 2007, led to the administrative division between the West Bank and Gaza and by extension the lack of a unified Palestinian leadership. However, 15 years later, and with the rise of a new generation of Palestinians, many do not even remember the factional tensions that led to this point.

In fact, since 2015 Palestinian youth have been manifesting national unity through their own actions – in mass mobilizations and political and cultural work throughout the major events of the past decade. From the uprising of 2015-2016 in the West Bank to the “Unity Intifada” in 2021 against the Israeli attempts to expel families from the Jerusalem Sheikh Jarrah neighborhoods, to the reactions to the repeated Israeli assaults on Gaza, Palestinians have demonstrated that they are anything but politically divided. But Palestinian political factions have never been able to take the opportunity to move toward unity.

The most striking failure to do so was the cancellation of the already-scheduled elections in April 2021 by the Palestinian president. Following the decision Palestinians demonstrated their unity in

the streets the following month, but instead of using the atmosphere to at least make an appearance of unity, PA security members killed Palestinian dissident Nizar Banat during an arrest in his home. This killing triggered a wave of protests against the PA that were met with violent repression and arrests of protesters, and solidified that the PA would not allow dissent, let alone move toward unity with its political rivals.

The new agreement came after months of often fractious unity talks in recent months in the shadow of the Gaza genocide.

Back in March, Palestinian factions met in Moscow for national unity talks. The factions issued a concluding statement reaffirming that they committed to cooperating to end the Israeli genocide in Gaza. The statement did not mention a vision for Palestinian leadership during or after the war. However, two weeks later, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas appointed a new Prime Minister to the Palestinian Authority, Mohammad Mustafa which was harshly criticized by Palestinian opposition factions. In a joint statement, Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the PFLP, and the Palestinian National Initiative called the appointment of Mustafa as “unilateral,” and as “deepening divisions in a historical moment” as the factions believed that, as a step toward national unity, any changes to the Palestinian government was to be appointed through collective deliberations.

This episode showcased yet again how division between political factions continues to prevent a unified Palestinian stance both at home and on the international stage, even after ten months of a genocidal Israeli assault on Gaza, and the ramping-up of moves to annex the West Bank. Such divisions have left Palestinians themselves in a position of being almost absent from the decision-making over the future of their own cause.

A leadership divided, not a society

In the end, the political divisions between Palestinian leaders is not due to divisions in the Palestinian society, but to the different compromises that the leaders have made to insure their place in Palestinian politics.

For example, the leaders of the Palestinian Authority have invested all their political and historical capital in a Western-led negotiation process, with the hope of reaching Palestinian statehood, even though this strategy has been shown to be bankrupt several times over, by Israeli and even PA officials themselves. This decision however has led to the PA being dependent on the approval of the U.S. and European donors, as well as on the Israeli-controlled customs money used by Israel repeatedly as a political weapon. These dynamics leave the PA no choice but a political program based on security and economic cooperation with Israel. A program that contradicts the popular will to such an extent that it needs to rely on growing authoritarianism to impose itself.

As for Hamas, and the other factions allied with it, their endorsement of resistance to the occupation by all means can be understood as the only way to present a serious opposition, and a credible alternative to the PA, regardless of the degree to which these factions practice resistance. The fact that in 2021 Hamas started a military confrontation with Israel from Gaza, in the middle of the Sheikh Jarrah protests, was in essence a political statement by Hamas, that it was ready to lead the Palestinians. Hamas saw this as necessary, in part, as the Palestinian political elections had been canceled a month earlier, depriving them of a strictly political venue to challenge the PA.

But Hamas was not leading the Palestinian street, but rather the other way around. It was trying to catch up with the unity that Palestinians expressed through their non-partisan, trans-geographical

unity across historic Palestine, with mass mobilizations. A unity that has revealed not only the outdated nature of the Palestinian partisan division, but also the failure of the political fragmentation of Palestinians by Israel, between Palestinians in '48 Palestine, the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem, and the diaspora.

The re-emergence of armed resistance in the West Bank since 2021, in the form of local community-based, transpartisan groups rooted in personal relationships has also showcased how obsolete the split between factions has become. One example was seen in October 2022, as the Israeli army intensified its campaign to dismantle the Nablus local resistance group 'The Lions' Den.' When the group called on Palestinians, through their Telegram channel, to come out on rooftops and streets at half past midnight, chanting their support for resistance. Thousands responded to the call, across all factions, in Nablus and other major West Bank cities. At the same time, leaders of Fatah and Hamas were meeting in Algiers, where they signed yet another national unity agreement, five days earlier, with barely any attention in the Palestinian public opinion. The difference in these two reactions reflected how the lack of unity among the Palestinian leadership is lagging behind the will of Palestinian society as a whole.

Gaza at the center

Today, at the center of the need for a restoration of Palestinian political unity is Gaza. The latest agreement came in the midst of negotiations between Hamas and Israel over a ceasefire deal in Gaza. After ten months of Israeli genocidal assault which has destroyed all of Gaza's infrastructure, and in the lack of any clear plan by anyone for a post-war reality in Gaza, a united Palestinian leadership is more needed than ever.

The ability of Palestinian factions to reunite, for the sake of Gaza's future at least, may determine in a large part their ability to survive politically.

While Israel and the U.S. insist that Hamas should not be part of the running of the strip after the war, Israel has been unable to destroy Hamas's presence and capacity to restore control in Gaza. While the U.S. wants the PA to "play a role" in Gaza's administration, this will prove to be extremely difficult without an agreement with Hamas, which would need at least a formal reconciliation involving all Palestinian factions. A need that has been urgent for Palestinians, long before the current war began.

Hamas, which effectively reshuffled all the cards in Palestinian politics when it launched the October 7 attack, is at the center of the current events and is the most relevant force in Palestinian politics at the moment. However, without national unity, Hamas's capacity to lead will remain limited to Gaza, and under the constant threat of Israeli assault. Despite its leading role in the war and in the ceasefire negotiations, Hamas also needs to overcome the political division and be part of a unified Palestinian leadership.

The latest China-sponsored Palestinian unity agreement might not have anything new in itself after all. But the urgency of the need for unity, both for the Palestinian people and for Palestinian leaders, including the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, is bigger today than it has ever been. The next test that Palestinian leaders must pass is to prove that they are able to form a consensus government, schedule new elections, and hold them.

These elections will need to include not only the PA's presidency and legislative council, but also the representative bodies of the PLO, to include Palestinians in the diaspora, and as much as

possible in '48 Palestine. This global aspect of elections was stipulated by previous agreements, to which the factions committed once again in the latest agreement in China.

The consequences of previous political failures have accumulated to the point where the Palestinian people are now facing the breaking point of an Israeli war on all Palestinians, which aims to end the hopes for a Palestinian state, the mass expulsion of millions of Palestinians, and the final annexation of the West Bank. The consequences of failure now cannot be overstated. And while the Palestinian people have found ways to reinvent its struggle after every major crisis or catastrophe over the past century, it is now the Palestinian leadership, at all points on the political spectrum, whose survival might depend on the success of a true national reconciliation.

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July 27, 2024 5:38 pm

I don't think they intend to govern under this agreement. They are agreeing not to be part of any attempt by Israel, the US, and Arab states to impose a post war puppet or occupation regime.

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Rosetta
July 27, 2024 9:59 pm

There are always people who can be bribed and bullied to serve the colonial masters and the Israelis are no different to any other colonial regime in this regard. The Palestinians for the sake of their homeland and their future must come together and unite in this fight for freedom and justice.

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John O
July 27, 2024 3:01 pm

Thank you, Qassam. You have provided much needed detail of the problems and possibilities facing the Palestinian people.

2
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Thomas Ellenberg
July 28, 2024 5:08 am

“Mustafa Barghouti, secretary-general of the Palestinian National Initiative, one of the 14 factions to sign the accord, told Al Jazeera the agreement goes “much further” than any other reached in recent years.

He said its four main elements are the establishment of an interim national unity government, the formation of unified Palestinian leadership ahead of future elections, the free election of a new Palestinian National Council, and a general declaration of unity in the face of ongoing Israeli attacks.”

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/23/palestinian-rivals-hamas-and-fatah-sign-unity-deal-brokered-by-china>

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· Qassam Muaddi

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