



## EGYPT REENTERS THE FRAY

by Tally Aharony

In a few months time, the current U.S. administration, following in the footsteps of its predecessors, will hand over the still unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Despite last-minute efforts by the Bush Administration to engage in shuttle diplomacy and broker a peace agreement, the future president will inherit a situation in the Middle East which is as broken as ever. Chief among the problems plaguing this tangled conflict, which has achieved longevity far greater than any of its original architects could have envisaged, is the fact that there are no partners with whom to negotiate. Of course there is the marked absence of consensus on delicate issues such as boundaries, refugee status, and Jerusalem, but equally disconcerting, there aren't any representatives, either. Even assuming that Israel soon chooses a new prime minister and readies itself for negotiations, what about the other side? The Palestinians are so busy fighting one another that the national project and the worsening state of affairs in the Territories have no champion, save for the same lame rhetoric that has become part of the cultural vocabulary but merely masks inaction and stagnation. What hope is there, then, for new Egyptian efforts?

### ARAB DISCONTENT

Recent years have been marked by such mishaps as the failure of the Annapolis initiative, the geographic division and fierce factionalization of Fatah and Hamas, and the futility of the Mecca Accord. These "accomplishments" illustrate not only the deep rift that has surfaced among Palestinian groups but also how effective these factions have been in thwarting outside initiatives to mend it.

To be fair, there are other, external factors afoot. While the Quartet and surprisingly Saudi Arabia have attempted to move this process back in the right direction, Iran and Syria have been working just as hard to keep the flame alight. Likewise, Egypt, to some extent, dropped the ball following Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 by closing the Rafah border crossing and extricating itself from responsibility for the parcel. Now, whether because of the Kingdom's surprising intervention in what has always been Egypt's pet project or because of its genuine irritation at the Palestinians' inexhaustible squabbling, Egypt has decided to make up for lost time.

However, Egypt's recent efforts to promote "national reconciliation" among the disparate warring Palestinian factions may very well be in vain. A storm is brewing in the Arab world, and it seems that the Palestinians and their botched national efforts are at its center. Infighting has led to a steady erosion of any progress of the Palestinian national agenda, and it seems that the Palestinian's Arab brothers are getting fed up with it.

On the heels of last month's Arab League meeting in Cairo, several of its high ranking members spoke out about the Palestinian situation and called for its immediate amelioration. At the concluding press conference, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal offered the most frank of the castigations, openly blaming Palestinians for the "damage inflicted to their cause."<sup>1</sup> Amr Moussa, secretary-general of the Arab League, echoed these sentiments, also stressing that the League "stands at an equal distance from all the Palestinian organizations and [is] outraged [with] everyone, and everyone [is] wrong." He went on to say that "There is destruction of the Palestinian position [to which] the Palestinian organizations contribute."<sup>2</sup>

### CAIRO ACTS AND HAMAS REACTS

Consensus is building among various Arab states that, left to their own devices, the Palestinian predicament and more specifically, the situation in Gaza, will only continue to deteriorate unless a stronger state among them steps in. Egypt sees itself in such a role and has commenced several cautious initiatives to this effect.

<sup>1</sup> "Saud al-Faisal: Palestinians Bear the Responsibility and Fighting Damaged Their Cause," *Al-Hayat*, Sept. 10, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Having held separate meetings over the past two months with various delegations of Palestinian groups, Egypt seeks to engage both Fatah and Hamas in direct talks in order to jumpstart the resolution of several critical points of contention. At the heart of Egypt's efforts is its intention to push for the establishment of a government made up solely of figures independent of existing factional affiliations. Parliamentary and presidential elections as well as a reconstitution of Palestinian security forces are key elements of the existing proposal. Of course one of the many sticking points is Hamas's ardent opposition to Abu Mazen's desired additional year as president. Hamas calls the proposal "unconstitutional" yet maintains a firm stance against the creation a government made up of "technocrats." Clearly its own survival and continued relevance are at the heart of its plights.

Nevertheless, a senior delegation of Hamas representatives arrived in Cairo on October 7 to take part in several days of meetings, aimed at the resolution of the enduring power struggle with Fatah. However, on the same day that its delegation began caucusing with Egyptian officials for, as it described on its websites, "the purpose of preparing to launch a comprehensive national dialogue to end internal division,"<sup>3</sup> Hamas also undermined the efforts in a series of accusations lofted at its future "partner" in reconciliation.

Arguing that Fatah is exhibiting "lack of seriousness" and is "not interested in the success of the forthcoming dialogue," Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum went on to say that recent comments by Azzam Al-Ahmad, head of Fatah's parliamentary bloc, regarding Palestinian affirmations of Egyptian troops entering Gaza are nothing more than "slander and misinformation and contradictions" intended to "achieve narrow factional gains at the expense of the national project."<sup>4</sup>

Later that same day, Dr. Sami Abu Zuhri, a spokesman for the Hamas movement, issued a statement to the Palestinian Information Center that "The goal of the arrival of this delegation is to review the movement's position on some issues relating to dialogue and to listen to our brothers in Egypt on the subject."<sup>5</sup> The following day, these comments were replaced with Barhoum's statement that, "Clearly, there is a Zionist agenda in common with Fatah to abort dialogue." This can be considered the mother of all accusations since it draws a comparison between Fatah, its rival, and Israel, the ultimate enemy.

It appears that Hamas is shooting these negotiations in the foot from the get-go. If Hamas can barely maintain some semblance of a unified stance within its own ranks within a given day, how will it be able to uphold any promises it makes to Egypt, or to another faction, for that matter? Should Palestinians brace themselves for the bleak realization that Hamas's number-one cause is, in actuality, Hamas?

Another way to look at it is as a matter of strategy, representative of the old patterns. While potentially standing on the precipice of an agreement, Hamas affirms its traditional stance vis-à-vis its rival, Fatah, so as to assure its followers of the tactical, and decidedly not ideological, nature of its move. This tactic is a tried-and-true play in Arab playbooks, often used in ceasefires.

## NEXT STEPS

Tensions are still high between Egypt and Hamas over other unresolved issues, including the continued closure of the Rafah border crossing and the issue of kidnapped IDF soldier Gilad Shalit. However, Hamas might be willing to engage in national reconciliation if it is in its own best interest.

If this round of meetings is successful, Egypt intends to host a meeting on November 4 that will include all the major Palestinian factions in direct talks on this season's buzzword, national reconciliation. But let's take it one step at a time and see what comes out of this round. Perhaps it will take a little more than a slap on the wrist from the Arab world and some good ol' Egyptian hospitality to right this mess.

Either way, Egypt's reentry into the fray is evidence of how the Palestinian situation is intimately tied to its strategic considerations. In taking custody over the latest rounds of reconciliation from the frustrated Saudis, Egypt must at the very least put forth a proposal that not only goes beyond the Mecca Accord but that can stand on its own two feet once the negotiators have left the room. Any future agreement would need to address, in specific terms, the breakdown of control over security forces. Likewise, the ideological landscape between Fatah and Hamas is vast. Provisions for how to handle such differences should be made lest the entire initiative collapse.

For Egypt, the stakes are high owing to a number of strategic factors. First, on the macro level, the initial Saudi bid, now taken up by Egypt, represents an effort to counterbalance Iran's influence in the Levant. Both Riyadh and now Cairo have their sights set on wooing Hamas away from Iran's grip, the former by means of money and the latter by means of mutually assured back-scratching. Egypt may benefit from the erosion of Hamas's position since the Mecca Accord due to the forced isolation it brought upon itself through its missile war with Israel and its blatant grab for power in Gaza. Border crossing accessibility is but one carrot that Egypt can dangle.

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<sup>3</sup> "The Hamas Delegation Leaves Gaza for Cairo for Talks in Preparation for the Dialogue," *Palestine Information Center - Hamas Website*, Oct. 7, 2008, <http://www.palestine-info.info/ar/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Barhoum: Al-Ahmed's Comments Reflect the Misinformation and Lack of Seriousness of Fatah on the Issue of the Dialogue," *Palestine Information Center - Hamas Website*, Oct. 7, 2008, [www.palestine-info.info/ar/](http://www.palestine-info.info/ar/).

<sup>5</sup> "The Hamas Delegation Leaves Gaza for Cairo."

On a micro level, Egypt cannot afford to have such chaos going on in its backyard. The consequences are twofold. On the one hand, Gaza might function as a safe haven for unsavory characters dangerous to the Egyptian government. On the other, there is the equal risk that Hamas might provoke the military wrath of Israel, injecting Egypt into a conflict not of its choosing. This in turn would of course involve the United States, which is just one more reason why Egypt cannot stand aside from the situation.

Unfortunately for Israel, even though major Arab states are vying to broker Palestinian reconciliation, their underlying intention probably has little to do with advancing an eventual Israeli-Palestinian peace. As long as the regional and strategic balance favors Iran (and Syria), Egypt and others have a stake in intervention to alleviate the situation.

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