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Middle East Brief

Coping with the Arab Spring: Palestinian Domestic and Regional Ramifications

Dr. Khalil Shikaki

The Arab Spring has touched Palestinian politics in several ways. So far, the impact has been felt most in three areas: the calculations of Fatah and Hamas regarding what alignments are in their best interest; their approach to reconciliation, and to the unification of the West Bank and Gaza Strip; and how they view relations with Israel.

On the one hand, the Arab Spring might eventually lead Hamas to distance itself from Iran and Syria in favor of closer relations with Egypt and Jordan. The end of the Mubarak regime puts an end to Egypt's role in containing Hamas in tiny Gaza, and the outcome of the Egyptian parliamentary elections creates the possibility of a de facto independent Hamas state in the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, Mahmoud Abbas, for his part, might find himself gradually more willing to challenge his peace interlocutors, Israel and the United States.

At the same time, the Arab Spring increased public demand for reunification of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, forcing Fatah and Hamas to scramble to gain time to avoid doing what each has so far sought not to do: reconcile. And although Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations were already dead, or almost dead, the Arab Spring promised to facilitate an alternative PA strategy: the waging of diplomatic warfare at the international level, with the intention of delegitimizing the Israeli occupation. On the Hamas-Israel front, the Arab Spring triggered dynamics that made it possible for a prisoners exchange deal, one that had been impossible months before.

This Brief explores all three issues—realignment, reconciliation, and relations with Israel—in the shadow of the Arab Spring. It begins with the baseline that prevailed early in 2011 and goes on to describe the domestic and regional changes that unfolded in the first half of 2011. Finally, I explore how the two Palestinian authorities, Hamas and Fatah, have dealt with those changes.¹

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The Baseline

In early 2011, it looked like business as usual for Palestinians, as both Hamas and Fatah were busy consolidating their positions. For Hamas, Fatah was its biggest fear: in particular, Fatah's destabilizing influence and potential return to Gaza. Driven by this fear, Hamas had already moved to ensure its monopoly over force in the Gaza Strip. The only exception to this rule was the case of Islamic Jihad and other smaller, like-minded groups, who were viewed as potential allies against Fatah. Allowing these groups and their militias to operate served other Hamas goals as well: They enhanced Hamas's projection of itself as a fierce resistance movement, and they could also be used as leverage against Israel.

Hamas's principal goal became the building of the institutions of a de facto state—one that would gradually become an Islamic state, with all legal and institutional powers. Although Hamas has never publicly admitted that it seeks Gaza's independence, some of its leaders have made it clear that Gaza, with no occupation and no foreign military presence on its border with Egypt and without treaty-based restrictions on its sovereignty, was all *but* independent—and would have become so, had it not been for the siege and blockade imposed by Israel with the active cooperation of Egypt, which was a willing participant in blocking entry to and exit from the Gaza Strip after June 2007, when Hamas violently took over control over the Strip. The temptation for Hamas was great: They, the Islamists—not Fatah, the nationalists—would be the first to deliver a Palestinian state, one that was truly sovereign in ways no nationalist state could ever be. The West Bank, in this scenario, would be able to join the state once it too was free of occupation.

Hamas's pursuit of independence has led it to do away with the presidency and to transfer its authority to the cabinet and the prime minister while creating alternative institutions, such as the Supreme Judicial Council, to those that operate in the West Bank. Parliament in Gaza, with a Hamas majority monopolizing its proceedings, acted as an independent body, ignoring its non-Hamas members and its West Bank counterpart. Islamization was implemented in a piecemeal and de facto fashion. To achieve its goal of state-building, Hamas employed four measures: It continued to give lip service to Palestinian unity to satisfy public demand; it improved relations with Egypt, on whose cooperation Hamas's entire vision rested; it reached an understanding with Israel on a cease-fire; and it mobilized international support to end the sea and land siege and blockade imposed by Israel.

Hamas's performance was indeed impressive. It improved security for Gazans; it managed to present itself as not corrupt, or at least as less corrupt than Fatah; it proved much more efficient in service delivery than Fatah had been for many years before 2007; and it cultivated an image of toughness in its relations with Israel, exacting a price for any concession and succeeding in maintaining its reputation as a resistance movement despite the relative calm in its relations with Israel. Its international campaign, particularly the Free Gaza flotillas, forced Israel to ease its siege and blockade.

But Hamas's successes have been constrained by three factors. First, Hamas's popularity has dropped by about one-third since the 2006 election—as a result of its inability to pay salaries to the public sector; the perception that its policies posed a threat to Palestinian national unity; and the impression among

Gazans that it aimed to limit personal freedoms and force Islamization on society. Second, Mubarak's pro-Abbas policy, as I discuss below, had greatly limited Hamas's political and economic achievements, and consequently its stature and authority, in the Gaza Strip. Finally, unlike Fatah and its prime minister, Salam Fayyad, in the West Bank, Hamas had limited access to outside international resources, owing to its rejection of donors' demands. And support from countries like Iran and Syria could not reach the Gaza Strip, in part as a result of Egypt's pro-Abbas policy.

For Fatah and Mahmoud Abbas, on the other hand, eliminating the threat posed by Hamas has been the most important goal in the immediate aftermath of the Islamist group's takeover of the Gaza Strip—a feat that Fatah feared Hamas would replicate in the West Bank. More than anything else, this fear led Fatah back in mid-2007 to seek a monopoly over coercive force in the West Bank. It accordingly cracked down on Hamas and Islamic Jihad and disarmed their armed wings while destroying their financial and social infrastructure. Since Abbas did not view armed resistance as a useful tool of policy, he dismantled Fatah's own armed wing as well. By doing so, Abbas, in conjunction with Salam Fayyad, managed to restore order to the West Bank and resume a process of state building that had been suspended with the eruption of the second intifada in 2000.

Once the threat by Hamas was addressed, state building emerged as Abbas's most important goal, and he focused on what he regarded as three necessary elements: building state institutions, improving the economy, and reaching a peace agreement with Israel. This led both to Salam Fayyad's two-year plan, which described steps and measures to be taken in preparation for statehood in two years, and to the decision to engage Israel and the U.S. in the Annapolis peace process. To achieve the goal of statehood, Fatah and Abbas employed four measures. Like Hamas, they continued to give lip service to Palestinian unity to satisfy the public; Salam Fayyad was retained as prime minister and his two-year plan implemented; peace and quiet were preserved through the dismantling of militias along with enhanced security coordination between the Palestinian and Israeli security services; and an international campaign was launched around the end of 2010 to mobilize international support for recognition of Palestinian statehood by September 2011.

Like Hamas, Fatah and Abbas have had their successes. The public sector under Salam Fayyad was functioning again, with salaries paid on time and services delivered more effectively; public security and order improved considerably year after year, and the era of armed militias

was over; and economic conditions improved, with annual growth averaging 7%, while unemployment in the West Bank declined considerably, from 23% to 16% by the end of 2010. And overall, Fayyad managed to project an image of efficiency, decency, and competence.

But Fatah, too, labored under constraints. First, Abbas and Fatah had a glaring deficit in terms of legitimacy, since Fatah had lost the 2006 parliamentary elections, and Abbas's term as President had already expired in January 2010. In addition, by the end of 2010 the peace process was perceived as dead. The formation of the Netanyahu government had led to the suspension of the Annapolis peace process, leaving both Abbas and Fatah in limbo, as the U.S. failure to bring about a settlement freeze or affirm terms of reference based on the Abbas-Olmert talks of 2008 left the Palestinian nationalist camp without a strategy to end the occupation and build a state. At the same time, the increased level of Palestinian-Israeli security coordination invited criticism and accusations of collaboration from at least half the Palestinian public.

Finally, despite some state-building success and economic improvement, the PA was facing difficulties meeting its financial obligations, and daily conditions on the ground—freedom of movement, settler violence, land confiscation, home demolitions—were not significantly improving. It was clear that such economic progress as had been made was the result of donor support, not of increased local production in agriculture or manufacturing. These conditions convinced Mahmoud Abbas that he needed an alternative strategy. The internationalization of the peace process began to gain internal Palestinian support. By the end of 2010, Abbas's UN bid for statehood had emerged as one of several possible alternatives.

The Storm Arrives: The Arab Spring

The Arab Spring arrived in Palestine in early 2011, threatening possible internal disturbances and regional nightmares. The internal disturbances took several forms. Sudden youth activism generated dozens of groups with names incorporating dates borrowed from the Tunisian and Egyptian experiences—for example, the March 15th Coalition—and brought about confrontations with Hamas and Fatah security forces. Young Palestinians had lost confidence in both political groups and no longer supported any of the other, smaller parties. They blamed all for the prevailing disunity, the failures in governance, and the stalemate with Israel. Emboldened by the successes of youths in Egypt and Tunisia, Palestinians too demanded regime change, particularly in the Gaza Strip. The Arab Spring's focus on freedom and dignity helped to change Palestinian public priorities. Greater emphasis was now

placed by Palestinian youth on governance, while matters related to “resistance” were, at least for a while, deemphasized.

The fallout from the external regional changes was especially threatening to Fatah and Hamas, at least in the short term. The three countries most critical for the Palestinians were going, or potentially going, through massive change: the fall of Mubarak in Egypt, the eruption of a popular uprising in Syria, and an Islamist-led destabilization in Jordan.

The change in Egypt, in particular, posed a serious risk to Abbas’s ability to manage his relations with Israel and Hamas. In the past, Mubarak’s Egypt had helped to stabilize Palestinian (Fatah or Hamas)-Israeli relations during periods of crisis, preventing or limiting escalation. It provided support and legitimacy to Abbas’s rule over that of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, thus bolstering Abbas’s claim to *de jure* control over the Strip. In so doing, it limited Hamas’s ability to build a truly massive military arsenal (such as that of Hezbollah in Lebanon) and constrained Hamas’s ability to bring Iranian and Gulf money and expertise into Gaza for economic development purposes. In short, Egypt’s containment of Hamas restricted the group’s ability to transform Gaza under its control into a *de facto* state. Abbas also counted on Egypt to provide him with legitimacy and unquestioned support if and when progress was made in the peace process, thus helping to sell any concluded agreement to a larger Palestinian and Arab constituency.

The uprising in Syria, on the other hand, posed a serious risk to Hamas’s ability to operate from that country, as Hamas was forced to choose between supporting the demonstrators or the regime. Standing with the regime outright would have discredited Hamas, while fully supporting the uprising would have required it to immediately search for an alternative base somewhere else, such as in the Gulf, Egypt, or Jordan. Since Iran and Hezbollah were Syria’s allies in its battle against its own citizens, Hamas’s relations with all three came under public scrutiny.

Up until now, the change in Jordan, in the form of constitutional amendments and government reshuffles, has been manageable. But further change, if it comes, would potentially be even more destabilizing to both Hamas and Fatah. Jordan has already seen strong, Islamist-led popular demands for greater freedom, greater accountability, a more equitable electoral system, and the depoliticization of its security services. The King and the government have responded by introducing constitutional and other reforms, and by allowing increased freedoms. In the regime’s attempts to appease or co-opt its Islamists,

however, lie potential benefits for Hamas and potential risks for Abbas. Greater change in Jordan could bring about more serious challenges, including an intensified struggle for Palestinian political influence between Jordanians of Palestinian origin and those of East Bank origin. An Islamist victory would give Hamas a golden opportunity to dominate Palestinian politics not only in Jordan but also in the West Bank and the entire diaspora, finally bringing an end to fifty years of Fatah’s nationalist hegemony.

Responding to the Arab Spring: Managing the Risks

The quick unfolding of events in early 2011 confronted Hamas and Fatah with immediate domestic risks, thereby affecting their strategic calculations about both present (short-term) and future (longer-term) policies. Palestinian youth, with the overwhelming support of the public at large, demanded unification of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, an end to the repression imposed by both governments, and a new strategy to deal with the Israeli occupation. The perils facing the two regimes involved different calculations of survival and legitimacy. Abbas was quicker to assess the risks, as his peace mission was dead and Mubarak, his main regional ally, disappeared so fast and so early that the event probably caused panic in the Palestinian Authority. Hamas, believing that the public could not or would not rise against a “resistance” regime, was late in assessing its own situation; but it soon realized that it was wrong, and that it too faced a potential existential threat.

Like Hamas, Abbas faced the possibility of a popular uprising if he did not show sincere commitment to reunification—and if he continued to ignore daily violations of law in the PA’s efforts to impose order and crack down on Hamas. Popular demand for regime change was linked to the PA’s failure to pursue reunification and reconciliation, to continued violations of human rights by PA security services, and to the cooperative relationship the PA security services enjoyed with the Israeli security services despite the diplomatic stalemate. Demand for regime change in the West Bank was especially high among the youth, particularly in March 2011. More than one-third of West Bankers (54% among 18–27-year-olds, 72% among Hamas supporters, and 46% among supporters of third parties) believed that there was a need to demonstrate and to demand West Bank regime change, and one-quarter indicated a willingness to participate in such demonstrations.

Hamas faced similar if not greater risks. Popular demand for regime change was even greater in Gaza, if

reunification/reconciliation was not seriously pursued and if the Islamist group continued to pursue de facto forced Islamization; and Palestinians believed that Hamas's repression in Gaza was much greater than that of Abbas and Fayyad in the West Bank. As indicated earlier, the popularity of the group had already declined considerably since the 2006 elections. Now, in March 2011, demand for regime change in Gaza was very high, especially (70%) among the youth; and regime change was supported not only by Fatah supporters but by 70% of the supporters of third parties. Two-thirds of Gazans believed that there was a need for demonstrations in the Gaza Strip demanding regime change; more seriously for Hamas, half of Gazans (62% among the youth, 38% among those over 47 years of age) indicated that they might participate in such demonstrations. Survey findings also revealed that if demonstrations were to erupt in the Gaza Strip, demands and slogans would focus not only on ending the West Bank–Gaza Strip split, but also on the absence of freedoms.

Ultimately however, by mid-2011, both Fatah and Hamas managed to overcome their populations' unease and considerably reduce the risks posed by a potential Palestinian Spring. Hamas did so through a combination of confrontation, appeasement, and diversion: a crackdown on demonstrations and other displays of opposition; appeasement through the endorsement of one of the goals of demonstrators—namely, reconciliation and reunification; and well-timed spiked tensions with Israel to coincide with internal demonstrations. Fatah and Abbas managed the situation by a combination of appeasement, co-optation, and diversion: endorsing the goal of reconciliation and implementing a series of reform measures while successfully co-opting most of the youth groups that were intent on independently organizing popular nonviolent demonstrations against the PA and Israel. The consolidation of the UN bid by Abbas provided a useful diversion, one in which critics of the regime were invited to become foot soldiers in the struggle for independence.

Responding to the Arab Spring: Seizing the Opportunities

Hamas and Fatah are still navigating through the regional fallout. Hamas seems poised to turn a new leaf, moving away from its traditional allies—Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah—toward Egypt and Jordan. Fatah, on the other hand, seems willing to risk a break with its traditional interlocutors, Israel and the U.S., and embrace a nonviolent Palestinian popular uprising.

The question Fatah and Hamas are grappling with is not only how to manage the risks, but also how to take

advantage of the opportunities afforded by the Arab Spring. For Hamas, the change in Egypt revives and strengthens the possibility of transforming the Gaza Strip into a de facto state under its control. One of the immediate outcomes of the fall of Mubarak has been the opening of the Rafah border crossing to normal passenger traffic. Its opening to goods as well as people would be a critical building block in the effort to put an end to the Israeli-imposed siege and blockade confining the Gaza Strip. For independence to become a reality, however, Hamas cannot continue to align itself with regimes like those in Iran and Syria. Only by realigning itself with countries like Egypt and Jordan can Hamas ensure that its goal is a credible one. The changes in Egypt and Jordan provide Hamas with the opportunity to bring about that realignment; the change in Syria is *forcing* Hamas to do so.

For Hamas, Egypt has therefore become the most critical regional player. To improve relations with that country's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), Hamas was willing to take steps it had hitherto refrained from taking. With Egypt's own regional needs in mind, Hamas was willing last May to sign a reconciliation agreement with Fatah and Abbas, one that it had refused to sign for more than eighteen months. Last October it released Israeli captive Gilad Shalit, accepting a prisoners exchange deal it had been rejecting for years. The Shalit deal improved Israel-Hamas relations and provided a more solid ground for the existing cease-fire. It also removed one of the main obstacles that has so far made it difficult for Israel to remove the siege and blockade over Gaza. And, finally, the deal affirmed Hamas's role as a "resistance" regime and increased its popularity among Palestinians.

Hamas is also seeking to improve its relations with Jordan, the country with the largest concentration of Palestinians in the diaspora. Jordan is also a country with a strong Islamist opposition, one that has led popular demonstrations against the regime. In its attempt to appease its Islamists, the Jordanian regime has an interest in normalizing its relations with Hamas—so such a rapprochement would clearly serve the interests of both sides.

If Hamas decides to go ahead with efforts to open the Rafah border crossing with Egypt, even if the cost is the permanent closure of Gaza's borders with Israel, it will find that the Palestinian public will support it. Findings show that a majority of 69% prefer (and only 27% do not prefer) having the Rafah crossing with Egypt open for goods and passengers on a permanent basis over a similar permanent opening of the Israeli crossings with the Gaza Strip. This step is popular in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and among supporters of both Hamas (83%) and Fatah (61%).

For Abbas, the opportunity that presents itself is the potential of the nonviolent model of the Arab Spring to enable him to develop and consolidate an alternative strategy in place of negotiations with Israel: namely, going to the UN and using the threat of a *Palestinian Spring* as leverage to force Israel to change its policy. In pursuing this goal, Abbas has been willing to go against the United States and risk losing its financial support. He also puts himself and the PA in a direct political confrontation with Israel.

The Palestinian public supports Abbas's effort to draw on the nonviolent nature of the Arab Spring as a model to emulate in the struggle for statehood, in conjunction with the UN bid. Public support for appealing to the UN is very high. Survey findings in the third quarter of 2011 show that a consensus is evolving over the issue of seeking UN membership and recognition of Palestinian statehood despite the fact that a large majority believes that the step will lead to the suspension of American financial support as well as of Israeli customs transfer and will lead to greater hardships on the ground, including more Israeli checkpoints and more settlements. Eighty-three percent support and only 16% oppose going to the Security Council to seek recognition of Palestine as a state. Indeed, 74% believe that there is no point in returning to negotiations with Israel without acceptable terms of reference and a freeze on settlement construction—and that President Abbas is right, therefore, to seek UN involvement. Furthermore, 61% support resorting to popular, unarmed, and nonviolent resistance, and 54% say that, in the event of UN recognition of a state of Palestine, they would participate in peaceful demonstrations intending to breach checkpoints and block roads used by settlers and the Israeli army. An identical 54% think that large-scale peaceful demonstrations in the West Bank and East Jerusalem would contribute to ending the Israeli occupation.

What to Do about Reconciliation?

When the Arab Spring arrived, reconciliation was not a top priority of either Fatah or Hamas. The domestic and regional ramifications of that event forced the two groups to reassess their positions; but so far, those positions have not changed. In fact, the Arab Spring provided impetus for other, competing goals: in the Hamas case, *de facto* Gaza statehood; in Abbas's case, an enhanced UN bid for statehood and recognition.

The bottom line, on Abbas's side, is that reconciliation will become possible when all or most of the following conditions are met:

- when statehood through resort to the UN proves elusive;
- when he concludes that Israel and the U.S. will not impose sanctions in retaliation for embracing Hamas, or if sanctions have already been imposed on account of an unrelated matter, like the UN bid;
- when public demand for reconciliation substantially increases, bringing with it the threat of regime change;
- when he believes Fatah would most likely win parliamentary and presidential elections; and
- when he reaches the conclusion that Hamas is serious about reconciliation—for example, by their agreeing to his conditions for the formation of a new government of independent experts, one that would oversee the transition to elections and the formation of a post-election government.

Abbas's failure to get the Obama administration to use leverage against Israel has effectively ended negotiations as his preferred option for long-term unification of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Instead, the United States' inability to restart negotiations has essentially led Abbas to adopt a new strategy, based on waging diplomatic warfare against Israel in international forums in order to delegitimize its occupation. This means that sooner or later, Israel and the U.S. will suspend, respectively, money transfers and financial assistance. When that happens, Abbas might take the risk he will not take now—by making a deal with Hamas.

As far as Hamas is concerned, the fulfillment of all or most of a similar set of conditions would presumably be necessary in order for reconciliation to become possible. If regional developments, most notably in Egypt, make it impossible for Hamas to transform the Gaza Strip into a *de facto* state, it would have to fall back on reconciliation. And as public demand for unification increases, to the point of threatening regime change, it would leave Hamas little choice but to seek reconciliation—or at least create the impression of movement on that front—or otherwise find a way of blaming Fatah for the lack of progress toward that goal. There is no doubt that demand for unification is much more organized today than at any time previously. Finally, Hamas is likely to seek reunification when it concludes that Fatah is serious about reconciliation—for example, by their agreeing to conditions that would ensure Hamas's capacity—if the Islamist group so decides, for legitimate or illegitimate reasons—to remain in control over the Gaza Strip even after losing a unifying election.

For Now: Muddling Through

With no evident prospects for a return to Palestinian-Israeli negotiations in the next twelve months, Hamas

and Abbas will continue to weigh their options as the consequences of the Arab Spring continue to unfold. Hamas's default option will probably involve entrenchment in the Gaza Strip with one eye on events in Ramallah and another on developments in the neighboring countries Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, hoping for the opportunity to transform its control over the Strip into a successful state-building exercise. Abbas's default option will probably involve an international campaign to gain recognition of a Palestinian state along with nonviolent mobilization on the ground to delegitimize the Israeli occupation, thereby putting himself in a direct collision course with both Israel and the United States. Success is uncertain for both Hamas and Abbas, however, and therefore neither can rule out reconciliation and reunification of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as an alternative strategy of coping with the internal and external ramifications of the Arab Spring.

But reconciliation would come with its own headaches, for both parties. Fatah can never be certain that Hamas will ever concede control over the Gaza Strip, even if it sustains clear-cut losses in parliamentary and presidential elections; and Hamas can never be certain that winning clear-cut *victories* in such elections will amount to anything other than the continuation of the status quo with Israel—in addition to Fatah's possibly denying it any foothold in the West Bank. For now, therefore, the two Palestinian groups will continue to muddle through, dealing with risks as they arise and hoping for an opportunity that either can exploit.

Endnotes

- 1 All data used in this Brief are based on 2011 polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research. For March, June, and September polls, see: www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2011/p39efull.html, www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2011/p40efull.html, and www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2011/p41efull.html.



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