

Five conditions to move inter-Palestinian dialogue

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Will there be a major incursion or a cease-fire in Gaza? That is the question Palestinians are asking themselves at the moment. On the Palestinian side, all the political and military factions have decided to accept a cease-fire if the Israeli government halts all its acts of aggression and allows all passages to Gaza, including the Rafah crossing, to reopen. Palestinians consider the cease-fire as the fruit of a national consensus and are awaiting an Israeli answer via the Egyptian mediator.

Until now, however, Israel is delaying its response and instead reports of a massive military operation against the Gaza Strip are gaining currency. This raises the question of whether Israel is really serious about a cease-fire or is just working on widening the rift between Palestinians.

Hamas (both the government in Gaza and the movement) has done much on the cease-fire issue in response to Arab and European requests. Hamas wants to see an end to the killings and invasion of Gaza by the Israelis, as well as an end to Israel's justifications for its aggression. Having met their commitments, Palestinians are now waiting for Rafah to open.

On the Israeli side, however, the potential for a cease-fire is low due to the domestic problems of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government. Cairo still awaits Israel's answer and for as long as Israel prevaricates international pressure must be brought to bear on the country because the alternative to a cease-fire may be a bloody confrontation. This, in turn, could spill over into the region.

Meanwhile, the prospects for national reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah have improved following last week's speech by President Mahmoud Abbas, which was welcomed by the Hamas prime minister, Ismail Haniyya. Only through national unity can Palestinians face the occupation and defeat the siege imposed on us all.

The most appropriate step that should follow these positive statements from both sides is the engagement of the Arab League to help break the siege and reopen the Rafah crossing to facilitate the movement of Palestinians to and from Gaza and bring in much-needed humanitarian and medical aid. The proposed issues to be discussed in any internal dialogue are as follows:

First, forming a government of national unity that contributes to ending the siege of Gaza and the political isolation. This requires flexibility from both sides and priority to national interests over factional interests.

Second, rebuilding the Palestinian security apparatus on the basis of proficiency. In this context there is no objection to bringing in experts from Egypt or Turkey to achieve this.

Third, committing to reform of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) so that it properly represents all Palestinians, both inside and outside the homeland.

Fourth, respecting the results of the presidential and parliamentary elections and reinforcing the principles of democracy, power sharing and the peaceful transfer of authority.

And fifth, committing to open the subject of early elections once national reconciliation and stability have been achieved.

Haniyya has been in close contact with a number of Arab leaders in recent days to support national reconciliation. These efforts emphasize that Hamas is serious about ending the rift with the brothers in Fatah and wants to expedite reconciliation in order to focus on the Israeli occupation and not allow Israel to exploit the opportunity to create facts on the ground that diminish prospects for the emergence of a Palestinian state.

It is clear that the US can't be an honest broker in this conflict. The US is Israel's ally, and this Israeli government is only buying time to build more settlements and strengthen its hold on Jerusalem. It is from this understanding that Palestinians must decide their position on the so-called peace process. We must also understand that this conflict requires the help of the Arab and Islamic world.

A united Palestinian stance, moreover, will also likely convince Israel to accept the cease-fire. Hence, the national unity dialogue must commence directly. This is the demand not only of the Palestinian people but of Arabs and Muslims generally. The coming weeks will be significant. In order that something positive may be generated, it is necessary to stop all incitement from all sides.

Ahmed Yousef is political adviser to the Hamas-led Foreign Ministry in Gaza. This commentary first appeared at bitterlemons.org, an online newsletter that publishes contending views of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.