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Gaza: Possible Outcomes of Egypt, Hamas, and Dahlan Talks

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Ismail Haniyeh, head of the political bureau of Hamas, during a press conference in the Gaza Strip, July 2017 © EPA



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The latest round of talks between Egypt, Hamas, and Mohammad Dahlan reignited the debate about the future of the Gaza strip. These talks were somewhat unexpected given the growing rivalry and tensions between the three parties: Hamas, Mohammad Dahlan, and Egypt. Hamas, of course, has been in control of the Gaza Strip since June 2007. Mohammad Dahlan is the former official in Gaza for Fatah, a Palestinian liberation movement that has conflicted with Hamas in the past. Finally, Egypt has long considered Hamas an illegitimate actor tied to the Muslim Brotherhood. These discussions occurred in the larger context of renewed negotiations between the United States and Arab countries on ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and reshaping the region's political map.

The new vision for the region has been influenced by three different visits to Washington, D.C.: The King of Jordan on 4 April 2017, the Egyptian president on 6 April 2017, and the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, in May 2017. During his visit, President Abbas assured the Palestinian and Arab diaspora that the heads of Arab states had a united view for the future of Palestine. Abbas came to Washington ready to discuss his vision of a Palestine within the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital with President Donald Trump.

However, this vision for a future Palestinian state can only be realized if the Gaza Strip is reintegrated into the Palestinian political structure. The rift between Gaza and the rest of the Palestinian Administration widened following the creation of Hama's Administrative Committee in Gaza. Hamas claimed that the Palestinian Unity Government was failing the Gaza Strip and this committee was formed as a result. To that end, in April 2017, President Abbas announced that the Palestinian Authority would take concrete action to dissolve the Administrative Committee in Gaza and responded by reducing the salaries of Palestinian Authority employees in Gaza by 30%, and by cutting electricity in Gaza and ending financial support to the families of detainees held in Israeli jails. These actions were intended to exacerbate the pressures currently facing Gaza's population, which are fueled by diminishing financial resources, the quasi-permanent closure of the Rafah border crossing with Egypt, and increased threats of military action from Israel. However, it is still unclear if Hamas will capitulate and dissolve the Administrative Committee. The future of the Gaza Strip is just as ambiguous, and there are various possible outcomes from the recent discussions between Hamas, Egypt,



and Dahlan. This article will investigate four likely scenarios that could result from these talks.

Scenario 1

One possible outcome of the recent discussions could be the reconciliation of the various Palestinian factions leading to a unified Palestinian political system and a cohesive Palestinian society. Furthermore, the Administrative Committee would be dissolved allowing the Palestinian Unity Government to grow stronger and increase its influence over the Gaza Strip. This plausible unification would officially occur during a special session of the Palestinian National Council's preparatory committee.

For the participants of the recent discussions, reconciliation is the only option for Hamas and Dahlan, as neither is recognized as a legitimate actor in both the regional and international arenas. In fact, both lack diplomatic representation to advocate for the interests of the Gazan population, authority over banks as well as the authority to issue passports, official documents, and salaries. Furthermore, they cannot fund or embark on strategic development projects, such as water desalination, electricity plants, or water treatment facilities. As a result, Hamas can never completely sever ties with the Palestinian Authority, even if their administration remains quasi autonomous. On the other hand, even though Egypt is currently working to contain Hamas, it does not want to further divide the Palestinian people. Even opening the Rafah border on the demands of Hamas and Dahlan would be a large concession given Egypt's policies on Hamas.

This first scenario would also require President Abbas to show unity among the Palestinian people to increase American support. This would ensure the American administration that Israel's vision of a solution is a Palestinian state in Gaza, with Palestine conceding most of the West Bank in exchange for self-governance and political autonomy through separate cantons. This unity is also needed to withstand and confront pressures from the United States over ending all financial support to families of prisoners and martyrs.

Even though the different parties have yet to see eye to eye on the dissolution of



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the administrative committee to strengthen the Unity government. Despite the many failed attempts at reconciliation between these various parties over the past 10 years, it still remains the most advantageous outcome for all. Reconciliation would unite the West Bank, with its size and resources, and the Gaza Strip, with its geographic advantages and human resources. Additionally, an agreement between the actors would lend legitimacy to the Palestinian struggle and the authority of President Abbas. Furthermore, a reconciliation would give Hamas the opportunity to be accepted on the world stage, something they have been striving for. In fact, Hamas made a firm gesture towards cooperation by publicly accepting, for the first time, a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders in its most recent Document of Principles and Policies, which represents a major shift in Hamas' policy.¹

Finally, this scenario will require the diverse factions to cooperate and co-exist, Hamas and Dahlan's goal, despite previously leaked comments referencing attempts to strip Abbas of his political authority. A rapprochement between Hamas and Dahlan will force the Palestinian Authority to make concessions to Hamas simply to distance itself from Dahlan. On the other hand, this situation, as well as pressure from Egypt, will likely force President Abbas to reconcile with Dahlan. Likewise, Egypt will assert its influence to prevent any alliances that could diminish Abbas's authority and will actively work to distance Hamas from Qatar, Turkey, and Iran's influence. Overall, Egypt's interest is to dissolve the Administrative Committee and to strengthen the Unity Government's influence over the Gaza Strip² to set the stage for legislative and presidential elections.³

Scenario 2

The second scenario consists of continued discussions coupled with slow progress. It is very likely that a rapprochement between Dahlan and Hamas, under Egyptian auspices and Emirati funding, is not as significant as it might appear, especially considering that tensions between Fatah and Hamas fluctuate, as does the relationship between the Palestinian Authority and Egypt. However, more attention was accorded to these talks due to the current regional climate, with newly shaped alliances, and renewed desires to solve the Palestinian crisis.⁴

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At first glance, the talks between Dahlan, Hamas, and Egypt appear as a mere tactic to improve the current abysmal situation in Gaza. However, the reason behind the talks counters the possibility of establishing a state in Gaza. The feasibility of a Palestinian state in Gaza as a pan Arab solution to the Palestinian crisis is one favoured by Israel and the current United States administration. This so-called “deal of the century” largely ignores the Israeli presence in Palestinian territory. However, this is a significant issue that has engendered mounting tensions between the Arabs and Israelis. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, for his part, has proposed a solution that resembles a Palestinian confederation with Egypt and Jordan, leaving the issue of Jerusalem to be resolved at a later date. The United States administration is also exploring this initiative.

However, the real danger is that Netanyahu’s initiative may overtake the Arab Initiative. According to Dr. Ofer Israeli,⁵ Israel has rejected the Arab peace initiative as it poses a security threat. Under Israel’s new initiative, as stated by Israeli, Arabs will be forced to recognize the state of Israel and Palestinian refugees will be absorbed into their countries of residence through comprehensive naturalization programs with international assistance, and, finally, Arab states must acknowledge Israel’s sovereignty over the Syrian Golan heights.⁶ With this initiative, Israel is taking advantage of the current weakness of the Arab states, which in turns puts additional pressure on Palestine. It is evident that President Abbas will reject this plan. However, the initiative could gain more traction should the relationship between Hamas and Dahlan, which Israel does not oppose, grows stronger.⁷

Additionally, Dahlan is striving to stage a comeback in the Palestinian political scene and Hamas could allow and aid him to do so. According to Eshki, it is unrealistic that Hamas would accept Israel’s initiative, especially that Hamas changed its position on the idea of a two-state solution in its Declaration of Policies and Principles.⁸ The real threat posed by a possible Hamas-Dahlan alliance is that it could legitimize the proposed Israeli initiative. This Israeli plan could remove Gaza from the map of a future Palestinian state, which would cause the whole idea of Palestinian state to collapse. Given this, there are various reasons that Egypt would support a rapprochement between Dahlan and Hamas.

Firstly, this relationship would benefit Egypt’s security situation amidst continued

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violence in the Sinai Peninsula, bordering Gaza. If Hamas showed a real willingness to co-operate on security matters, then Egypt might open more diplomatic channels with Hamas in the future. Secondly, this rapprochement could relieve the dire humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, preventing further chaos. Finally, a closer relationship between Egypt and Hamas could distance the group from the Qatari, Turkish, and Iranian sphere. As Egypt has close economic ties with Saudi Arabia, it is in their interest to distance Hamas from Qatari and Turkish influence. Regardless of how this tripartite relationship plays out, it is likely that Egypt is using this relationship to pressure President Abbas into making concessions and to further the Arab plan for peace.

Scenario 3

In this third scenario, talks between the three parties are merely a tactic to ease Gaza's current pressures with no significant changes. Hamas does not have diplomatic legitimacy, poverty is increasing, and the humanitarian situation in Gaza is deteriorating. On a larger scale, Egypt and the rest of the region are not yet ready to sideline President Abbas, at least not where Gaza is concerned.⁹ A spokesman for the Egyptian government, Ambassador Alaa Yousef, confirmed Egypt's stance when he stated, "Egypt will not support any agreements between Hamas and Dahlan and will continue to call for the unity of Palestinian people, beyond Abbas and the PLO. However, Egypt will not stop Palestinian factions from meeting in an attempt for reconciliation".¹⁰

Egypt's first priority is to prevent the situation in Gaza from imploding. Currently, Egypt is taking advantage of Qatar's loss of influence in regional politics to further distance Hamas from Qatari influence. Simultaneously, Egypt is also implementing measures to secure its border with the Gaza Strip while also actively severing all ties between Hamas and militant groups in Sinai.¹¹ In return, Hamas receives increased mobility and the situation in Gaza has improved as this rapprochement with Egypt will continue to reduce the effects of the siege on Gaza in the long run.¹² Additionally, according to journalist Yossi Melman, in this scenario Israel is torn between supporting Palestinian action against Hamas and hindering the continued deterioration of the situation in Gaza as a result of increased military



activity”. Avigdor Lieberman echoes this sentiment by claiming that “Abbas’s recent actions against Hamas could subject Gaza to another war with Israel”.¹³

One thing is certain, however. It is in no one’s interest for the situation in Gaza to implode. All the actors involved understand there is a fine line between weakening Hamas and completely revoking its legitimacy in Gaza. Should the situation in Gaza deteriorate, the effects would be far reaching and would create a vacuum of power by undermining Hamas. Jihadist groups could take advantage of this void, the high levels of unemployment, and the poor living conditions. Increased jihadi influence would also pose a problem for Egypt and Israel and worsen the volatile situation at the Egypt-Gaza border. Furthermore, Israel, as the occupying state, would have to bare all legal responsibility for the consequences of a regressing situation in Gaza.

Scenario 4

There are also two possible war scenarios that could result from these talks. In the first case, Hamas would be severely weakened but would still maintain limited authority over Gaza. Israel considers Hamas a terrorist organization and wants to eradicate it, however, at the same time, Israel also recognizes that a complete collapse of the political structure in Gaza must be avoided. Furthermore, Israel’s goal is to separate Gaza from the rest of the Palestinian territories without destroying it. However, for this to happen the situation in Gaza needs to be stabilized and this will limit the extent Israel would be willing to use excessive military force in Gaza.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Israel will not hesitate to weaken Hamas whenever possible.

Furthermore, in this scenario, it is in Israel’s best interest to create a quasi-independent state in Gaza. This state would be supported by Egypt and Hamas would no longer have any power.¹⁵ As Israel’s top priority is its own security, an early warning system would be installed along the border so Israel could always be prepared to defend itself. Consequently, Israel will continue airstrikes against Hamas’s positions which it considers a threat. Furthermore, even if the system in Gaza collapses, the talks between Hamas, Dahlan, and Egypt could be used as a future avenue to negotiate with Israel.



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The second possible war scenario is based on Israeli intelligence which predicts that Hamas will be strong enough to pose a large threat to Israel in only two years. Should this materialize, Israel would be forced to launch a full-scale military operation against Hamas.¹⁶ Israel's strategy would be to put an end to Hamas, which is not implausible given the current anti-terrorist climate in the region, especially from actors with support from the United States. The United States and Saudi Arabia, who are spearheading these efforts, both list Hamas as a terrorist group.¹⁷

Furthermore, as the threat of violence from Hamas is enough for Israel to justify a war against Gaza where the residents of Gaza would pay the ultimate price. As a result, many will flee to the Sinai to escape Israel's war on Hamas. This escalation in violence is a possibility given that Arabs have been accepting of the efforts in Mosul, Sirte, and Raqqa to defeat ISIS, without considering the high numbers of civilian casualties or their forced displacement. However, the world is willing to accept this impact on civilians so long as terrorist groups are defeated. The outcome of the total defeat of Hamas would leave a power vacuum in Gaza and it is unclear who would fill this void.

Recent Developments

Shortly before this article was published, Hamas announced its plan to dissolve the Administrative Committee. This recent development was due to Egypt's initiatives during the mediation between Hamas and Dahlan. This action is significant and demonstrates that Hamas is keen to move closer to Egypt, forcing it to distance itself even further from Qatar. Secondly, this shows that the new Hamas leadership is committed to a strategy of dissociating themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood and moving closer to the Egyptian, Saudi, and Emirati spheres of influence. Furthermore, by dissolving the Administrative Committee, Hamas can no longer be accused of holding up the peace process and it is now up to President Abbas to make the next move. Abbas will most likely respond by ending the sanctions against the Gaza Strip. Likewise, the Unity Government will now travel to Gaza in order to fill the void left by the dissolution of the committee.

Hamas is not the only key player in the Palestinian issue, Egypt is once again an



influential actor. This process of trust building between Hamas, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority through the recent talks will continue, albeit slowly. Furthermore, this rapprochement between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, under Egyptian guidance, will not affect Dahlan and Hamas, as Dahlan has previously stated that he would welcome any opportunities to improve relations with the Palestinian Authority. However, Dahlan has no choice but to accept this relationship if he wants to appear supportive of Palestinian unity. Despite this progress, the residents of Gaza will have to wait months before they see any improvements in their living conditions. Until there is a true reconciliation and alliance between Hamas and Fatah, the future of Gaza will remain uncertain and any of the scenarios described in this article are plausible.

Conclusion

The current tensions surrounding the Gaza Strip means that its future is uncertain. However, various scenarios could result from the current talks on Gaza between Egypt, Fatah, and Dahlan. The first scenario envisions a complete reconciliation between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, and is the best possible solution for all Palestinians. If the second scenario would entail an alliance between Hamas and Dahlan without the Palestinian Authority, it would make it more likely that Gaza will separate from the rest of Palestinian, diminishing any chance of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. The third scenario, for security reasons, might be acceptable in the short term and may even temporarily improve living conditions in Gaza. However, it could still lead to a quasi-state in Gaza. The fourth scenario would result in a renewed war in Gaza. However, this scenario is the least plausible as Egypt as well as other Arab countries will intervene to prevent a war, as it would harm plans to normalize relations with Israel to counter the growing influence of Iran and terrorist groups in the region. Currently, Egypt might push to move talks forward while ensuring that President Abbas is included in any discussions between Hamas, Egypt, and Dahlan. This would be an attempt to force a sort of reconciliation until the perfect scenario plays out.

Recommendations



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On the regional level, this paper recommends that Hamas and the Palestinian Authority reconcile and unite forces in order to strengthen the National Unity Government, which would oversee the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Once this is achieved, they can prepare for general elections, which will reinvigorate the Palestinian political system as well as the legitimacy of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Additionally, this article also calls on Arab states to not bring Palestine into regional disputes. The Palestinian cause should not be used as a pawn by those attempting to assert political dominance in the region. Furthermore, any regional solutions to the crisis must be to secure the full rights of the Palestinian people.

On the international level, every actor must abide by all decisions grounded in international law. This paper calls for renewed and sincere efforts by the international community to resolve the Palestinian crisis, which will, in turn, facilitate riding the region of terrorism and tensions as well as bringing an end to the current refugee crisis. Consequently, alliances in the region would be based on peace and growth, instead of power and destruction.



Endnotes

1. During a press conference held in Doha on May 1st, 2017, Khaled Mashaal announced Hamas's Document of General Principles and Policies. The document has 42 points, the most important of which accepts the 1967 borders as the basis for a Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital and the return of refugees to their homes.
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