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## **The Crisis in Palestinian Politics: From National Consensus to National (Dis)Unity**

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On January 29, Rami Hamdallah submitted his resignation to President Mahmud Abbas, ending his term as Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority (PA)'s "national consensus" government, which was formed in June 2014 as part of an attempt at national reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah.<sup>1</sup> Hamdallah's resignation represents the most recent failure to revive a stagnant October 2017 national reconciliation agreement between the governing authorities in Gaza and the West Bank. Fatah officials are suggesting that Fatah will form a new "national unity" government without Hamas, ostensibly cancelling the 2014 agreement that led to Hamdallah's "national consensus" government.<sup>2</sup> His resignation is the culmination of a series of events since November 2018 that have resulted in a sharp deterioration in relations between Ramallah and Gaza. The stakes for the Palestinian people could not be higher. According to Hussam al-Dajani, a professor at Al-Umma University in Gaza, the failure to achieve national unity and end the twelve-year power struggle between Hamas and Fatah "will lead to separating the West Bank from Gaza and destroying the Palestinian state project."<sup>3</sup>

The tension between Fatah and Hamas dramatically escalated in the aftermath of an Egyptian and U.N. mediated understanding between Israel and Hamas, which included a \$150 million Qatari aid package.<sup>4</sup> The agreement was intended to end the Hamas organized "Great March of Return" demonstrations at the Gaza border and

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<sup>1</sup> "[Palestinian government submits its resignation to President Abbas](#)," *Wafa*, January 29, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmad Melham, "Fatah will form a new government without Hamas," *al-Monitor*, February 3, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Mohammed Haboush, "[Hamas-Fatah tension takes its toll on reconciliation](#)," *al-Monitor*, January 17, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed Shehada, "[Impatient with temporary deescalation deal, Hamas demands immediate Qatari funding in meeting with Egyptian delegation](#)," *Mada Masr*, October 31, 2018.

ease the blockade on Gaza. On November 9, Israel allowed Qatar to hand deliver the first \$15 million in cash to pay the salaries of Gaza's civil servants.<sup>5</sup> PA President Mahmoud Abbas had demanded that the Qatari payments flow into Gaza through the Palestinian Authority, but ultimately Israel and Qatar excluded the PA from the process.<sup>6</sup> On November 11, an Israeli intelligence operation in the Gaza Strip was discovered by Hamas' forces and led to 72 hours of armed conflict between them.<sup>7</sup> Despite the brief eruption of violence, Egyptian mediation appeared to salvage the fragile understanding between Israel and Hamas and prevent another round of full-scale war for the time being.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Fatah leaders in the West Bank condemned the deal as aiding a "U.S.-Israeli" conspiracy to divide the Palestinians and establish a separate Palestinian entity in Gaza.<sup>9</sup> They viewed Qatar's role in the deal as meddling in Palestinian internal affairs by bypassing legitimate Palestinian leadership, while deepening the rift between Gaza and the West Bank by supporting Hamas and undermining reconciliation.<sup>10</sup> Mahmoud Abbas' responded with an official statement that strongly asserted, "there will be no Palestinian state without Gaza," and no independent state in Gaza.<sup>11</sup>

In December, Abbas also claimed that the Qatari cash allowed Hamas to transfer funds from Gaza to the West Bank to finance attacks on Israelis.<sup>12</sup> On December 9, there was a drive-by shooting at a bus stop in Ofra that wounded seven Israelis and resulted in the death of a baby. On December 13, another drive-by shooting at the Giv'at Assaf outpost killed two Israeli soldiers and critically wounded two others. These attacks were carried out separately by two brothers, Salih and Assam Barghouti, and organized by Jasser Barghouti, a senior Hamas operative in the West Bank, who was released from prison as part of the 2011 prisoner swap that freed

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<sup>5</sup> Nidal al-Mugrabi, "[Qatar pays Gaza salaries to ease tensions: Israel says money's not for Hamas](#)," *Reuters*, November 9, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> "[The Palestinian government refuses to provide aid to Gaza without coordination](#) [Arabic]," Arab48.com, October 16, 2018; Avi Issacharoff, "[Israel and Hamas cheer Gaza's cash infusion, but Abbas could spoil the party](#)," *Times of Israel*, November 11, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Brandon Friedman, "[Another Gaza War?](#)," *Geopoliticus*, Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI), November 13, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Rasha Abou Jalal, "Egypt proves itself a reliable mediator to Palestinians," *al-Monitor*, December 3, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> "[Abbas: Hamas serves American interests and the 'deal of the century' will not happen](#) [Arabic]," Skynewsarabia.com, October 29, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/yc4cbu2q>

<sup>10</sup> Khaled Abu Toameh and Tovah Lazaroff, "[Fatah Blasts Qatar Over Fuel Delivery to Gaza](#)," *Jerusalem Post*, October 9, 2018; See, also: Ahmad Shehada, "[Palestinian Authority nears decision to remove sanctions on Gaza administrative salaries as Egypt intensifies mediation efforts](#)," *Mada Masr*, October 24, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> "[Hamas 'sells' Palestinian blood for \\$15 million dollars](#) [Arabic]," *Wafa*, November 9, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Rasha Abou Jalal, "[Abbas attacks Netanyahu for letting Qatari funds into Gaza](#)," *al-Monitor*, January 7, 2019.

Gilad Shalit.<sup>13</sup> Palestinian security officials claim they thwarted an additional eight attacks directed at Israelis, seizing more 250,000 shekels (\$65,000) used to finance the operations.<sup>14</sup> Abbas' view was that Israel's deal with Hamas was coming at his expense. Hamas was delivering quiet on the Israel-Gaza border by targeting Israel from the West Bank, undermining Abbas' authority and the PA's security control. For example, in pursuit of the December 9 attackers, Israel conducted an unusually large and visible military operation in the heart of Ramallah ("Area A") on December 10.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in a December 16 speech, the head of Hamas' political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh declared, "We have high hopes for the West Bank. It is the main area where events are taking place and the most appropriate scene to resolve the conflict with our Zionist enemy."<sup>16</sup>

Less than a week later, on December 22, Mahmoud Abbas made a bombshell announcement that a Constitutional Court had ruled on dissolving the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and that Abbas would push for new legislative elections within six months.<sup>17</sup> Legislative elections would be the first such parliamentary elections since Hamas' 2006 landslide victory (76 of 132 seats). Hamas rejected Abbas' plan for holding legislative elections alone, instead calling for a consensus agreement on general elections that include the presidency, the PLC, and the National Council (the PLO parliament).

Following Abbas' announcements, confrontation between Hamas and Fatah rapidly escalated. In late December, dozens of Fatah officials were detained in Gaza in the run-up to Fatah's 54<sup>th</sup> anniversary activities on January 1, which were ultimately cancelled by Hamas in Gaza.<sup>18</sup> In the West Bank, during the first few days of January, the PA's security services rounded up Hamas operatives in reprisal.<sup>19</sup> Also in early January, gunmen in Gaza raided Abbas' official Palestine Television station offices in

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<sup>13</sup> Elior Levy, "[PA believes it has identified Hamas mastermind behind deadly West Bank attacks](#)," Ynetnews.com, December 17, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Rasha Abou Jalal, "[Abbas attacks Netanyahu for letting Qatari funds into Gaza](#)," *al-Monitor*, January 7, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Ahmad Abu Amer, "[What triggered Hamas' attacks on the West Bank?](#)," *al-Monitor*, December 21, 2018; See, also: Daoud Kuttub, "[Violence escalates amid Israeli raid of Ramallah](#)," *al-Monitor*, December 14, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Hana Salah, "Is this the downfall of the Egyptian-brokered truce?," *al-Monitor*, January 2, 2019; See, also: "[The speech of the head of the Hamas political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh](#) [Arabic]," Palestine Information Center, December 16, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Rasha Abou Jalal, "[Will Abbas go through legislative elections without Hamas](#)," *al-Monitor*, January 9, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Mohammed Haboush, "[Fatah-Hamas tension takes its toll on reconciliation](#)," *al-Monitor*, January 17, 2019; Elior Levy, "[Fatah's anniversary rally in Gaza canceled due to Hamas threats](#)," Ynetnews.com, January 6, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Khaled Abu Toameh, "[Egyptian officials meet Hamas' Haniyeh in an effort to defuse Gaza crisis](#)," *Jerusalem Post*, January 10, 2019.

Gaza, destroying valuable equipment and rendering the office inoperable.<sup>20</sup> The escalating tension reached its peak with the PA's January 7 decision to withdraw its staff from the Rafah border crossing with Egypt. In October 2017, the PA had taken control of the crossing for the first time in ten years as part of the October 2017 reconciliation agreement that was signed in Cairo. The PA's withdrawal from the crossing meant that Egypt would not permit outgoing pedestrian traffic from Gaza into Egypt, only allowing Gazans to return from Egypt.<sup>21</sup> In essence, the PA's decision had reimposed, *de facto*, part of the blockade on Gaza. Fatah viewed Hamas as steering the reconciliation process towards a dead end, with no intention of relinquishing administrative control of Gaza to the Palestinian Authority. Therefore, Fatah was prepared to impose a series of political, administrative, and financial measures to strengthen the siege on Gaza.<sup>22</sup>

Despite Abbas' strenuous efforts to squeeze Hamas into submitting to PA authority in Gaza, Hamas shows no signs of making the concessions Fatah is demanding of it. Instead, Hamas is counting on bolstering ties with Egypt in order to maintain its control in Gaza. Despite Qatar's timely cash injection to relieve the humanitarian crisis there, it is Egypt that Hamas is depending on for its survival.<sup>23</sup> The relationship between them has been incrementally warming since October 2018.<sup>24</sup> In late November, Egypt reportedly granted Hamas officials permission to use Egypt's airport for international travel.<sup>25</sup> On December 30, Egypt released three Hamas detainees, Hossam Abu Watfa, Muhammed Ghaith, and Aymen Malihah.<sup>26</sup> Egypt views Hamas' cooperation as an important part of its war against jihadi militants in the Sinai. On January 31, Egypt offered to permanently reopen Rafah

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<sup>20</sup> "[Palestine TV offices in Gaza ransacked, equipment destroyed](#)," Reuters, January 4, 2019; "[Unknown assailants destroy the headquarters of Palestine TV and Radio in Gaza](#) [Arabic]," Wafa, January 4, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> "[Egypt opens Rafah crossing allowing passage in one direction](#)," *Ma'an News*, January 13, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Ahmad Shehada, Asmahan Soliman, and Thayer Oun, "[Hamas put on the spot after Palestinian Authority withdraws staff from Rafah crossing](#)," *Mada Masr*, January 12, 2019; "[Abbas planning to widen anti-Hamas push as Palestinian rift grows](#)," *Times of Israel*, January 13, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Shlomi Eldar, "[For Hamas reconciliation with Egypt worth more than Qatari cash](#)," *al-Monitor*, January 31, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Fathi Sabah, "'[Convergence](#)' between the visions of Hamas and Egypt for reconciliation" [Arabic], *al-Hayat*, October 1, 2018. It is also important to note that Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which had reportedly been behind efforts in Gaza to undermine the November understanding between Israel and Hamas, has recently expanded its ties with Iran, and has been tasked with collecting surveillance intelligence for Iran, with a particular focus on the activities of the Egyptian military. This was first reported by Israeli Channel 12's Ohad Hemo, see: Ohad Hemo, [Twitter Post](#) [Hebrew], February 3, 2019, 11:06 am.

<sup>25</sup> Ahmad Shehada and Thayer Oun, "[New proposal for Fatah-Hamas reconciliation that could send Palestinians to polls awaits Abbas approval](#)," *Mada Masr*, November 28, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Adnan Abu Amer, "[Why Egypt chose this moment to release Hamas detainees](#)," *al-Monitor*, January 8, 2019.

crossing on the condition that Hamas end the "Great March of Return" Friday demonstrations, which it has organized at the security fence with Israel since March 2018.<sup>27</sup> There are ongoing talks between Egypt and Hamas to expand bilateral trade. Egypt would like to use stronger commercial ties with Gaza to win prospective U.N. contracts for relief and development there.<sup>28</sup> On January 11, Hamas co-founder Mahmoud al-Zahar announced tentative plans to build a commercial crossing next to Rafah, which would allow Hamas to circumvent Israel and the PA at the Kerem Shalom commercial crossing between Israel and Gaza.<sup>29</sup> Israel imposes limitations on goods and raw materials that it deems as having a dual civilian and military use and both Israel and the PA impose high taxes on goods transiting into Gaza through Kerem Shalom, which is the sole commercial transit point for the territory.<sup>30</sup> In theory, providing Gaza with an independent commercial crossing would increase Egypt's leverage as a mediator between Fatah and Hamas, however it is also likely to reduce Hamas' immediate incentives to compromise with Fatah.

On the face of it, Hamdallah's resignation and new legislative elections offer an opportunity for the revitalization of an institution of Palestinian politics (the PLC) that has been immobilized since 2007. On the other hand, it also paves the way for the total institutional separation of the West Bank from Gaza, which would represent the collapse of the Palestinian state project. It is easy to overstate this longstanding divide between Hamas and Fatah, nevertheless, as Shawan Jabarin, the director of the Palestinian human rights organization *al-Haq*, recently observed, "Our country is being destroyed from within, and all checks and balances are being violated."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> ["Egypt offers to reopen Rafah crossing if Hamas halts clashes with the IDF: report,"](#) i24news.tv, February 2, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Ahmad Abu Amer, ["Expect trade activity boost between Egypt, Gaza Strip,"](#) *al-Monitor*, January 20, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> ["Zahar: Egypt is currently establishing a commercial crossing with Gaza](#) [Arabic]," *Sawa*, January 11, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Ahmad Abu Amer, ["Expect trade activity boost between Egypt, Gaza Strip,"](#) *al-Monitor*, January 20, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Daoud Kuttub, ["Why was the Palestinian Legislative Council Dismantled?,"](#) *al-Monitor*, December 30, 2018.

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