

Fatah and Hamas: A Marriage of Necessity

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No one believed that Palestinian Unity Government of June 2014 was the inevitable outcome of a surreptitious love affair between Fatah and Hamas. For the Hamas leadership in Gaza and the Gulf, and for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, or Abu Mazen as he is more commonly known, it was a last ditch effort to survive the tidal wave of changes washing over the Middle East. They were facing a critical juncture and they knew it. If they were ever to get through it at all, they had no choice but to link arms, grit their teeth, and bear it.

Abu Mazen was never prodded into peace talks with Israel by an overly eager U.S. Administration. Eight months into the nine that John Kerry had allotted to the negotiations, not only was it apparent to Abu Mazen that the talks were leading nowhere, but he also knew that his standing among his own people had suffered a severe blow as a result. Even his efforts to get prisoners released ran into a brick wall, when Israeli negotiator Tzipi Livni announced that her country would not be releasing the fourth and final group of Palestinian detainees, agreed to as a precondition for that round of talks. She was forthright in explaining the decision as an act of retaliation against Palestinian efforts to win full recognition from the United Nations.

Abu Mazen's response was probably inevitable. He had originally hoped to get a freeze on construction in Israeli settlements in the West Bank, but settled on the release of 127 prisoners "with blood on their hands," as Israel described them, as the next-best option. These prisoners were to be released in four "pulses," but each time a group was released, Israel responded to rightwing pressure at home by increasing construction in the West Bank. By the time Israel flat-out refused to release the final group, Abu Mazen was already seen by his constituents as a weak and spineless leader. Worse, he continued to maintain security protocols with Israel no matter how much Israel humiliated him. By the time he formed his Unity Government, his popularity among the Palestinian public had reached an all-time low.

Meanwhile, Hamas was facing its own crisis. With the fall of President Mubarak in Egypt and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas had found a natural ally along its only border that wasn't with Israel. But then President Morsi was toppled in 2013, and Egypt's new leader, General Sisi, outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood and, by extension, its offshoot, Hamas. Gaza's economy began to

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collapse as Egypt sealed the smuggling tunnels between Gaza and the Sinai. Not only were these the main conduit of raw materials and goods into Gaza, but the local economy also relied heavily on taxes imposed on those smuggled goods.

This was the final blow to a regime that survived seven years of Israeli control of its borders. Once it was apparent there was no money in its coffers, Hamas recognized that it had no choice but to reconcile with the very government in Ramallah that they reviled. They had managed to build a self-contained bureaucracy after their 2007 coup and the expulsion of Fatah from the Gaza Strip. Now, however, they needed Fatah to pay that bureaucracy's salaries.

That was why a technocratic Unity Government was sworn in for both the West Bank and Gaza on June 2, 2014. West Bank Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah, long considered an independent, was chosen to head the new government. This new era of harmony between the two rival factions was destined to last just ten days.

On June 12, three Israeli yeshiva students were abducted in the West Bank by two terrorists from the Hebron region: Marwan Qawasmeh, from a prominent local family, and Amr Abu Aisha. While the Qawasmeh clan had ties to Hamas, they also had a reputation for launching attacks against Israel in violation of official Hamas policy. Attacks they orchestrated in Jerusalem (2002) and Beersheba (2004) resulted in the breakdown of tense ceasefires with Israel, achieved through laborious negotiations behind the scenes. This latest abduction was planned by another member of the clan, Mahmoud Qawasmeh, one of 1,027 prisoners released by Israel in 2011 in exchange for the abducted soldier, Gilad Shalit. Now based in Gaza, Qawasmeh arranged the abduction in order to force Israel to release additional prisoners.

Israeli intelligence confirmed that Hamas had no information about the abduction. In fact, at that time, any efforts to exacerbate the movement's relationship with Israel was considered detrimental to the reconciliation efforts with Fatah. In an interview with Yahoo News, Khaled Meshaal, head of the Hamas political bureau, stated unequivocally that the leadership of Hamas only learned about the details of the abduction from the Israeli investigation. Nevertheless, he threw his support behind the kidnappers, just as he had done after the Qawasmeh clan's previous attacks, most notably the Beersheba attack, which came just six months after Israel had agreed to halt its assassination campaign against the movement's leaders in exchange for an end to terrorist attacks.

Despite Meshaal's denial that Hamas was involved, Abu Mazen refused to transfer money for salaries to Hamas in Gaza, in violation of the reconciliation agreement that had enabled the formation of the Unity Government. As far as

Hamas was concerned, reconciliation had not simply failed to resolve its immediate financial problems, but actually made them worse.

The situation deteriorated sharply when Israel launched Operation “Brother’s Keeper” in the West Bank to find the perpetrators and rescue the teens. It conducted a wave of arrests in the West Bank, arresting many of the Hamas activists who had been released as part of the Shalit deal. Thus, Hamas’s only remaining achievement had essentially been erased.

Given the circumstances, Israel was convinced that Hamas would not dare to get embroiled in an armed conflict with it. Meanwhile, the Hamas leadership believed that Israel had no interest in opening a new front along the border with Gaza. They were both wrong. In order to appease his enraged constituents and especially his rightwing coalition partners, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was fulfilling his threat that, “Hamas is guilty, so Hamas will pay,” while Hamas was simultaneously encouraging armed groups unaffiliated with its own militant wing to fire rockets at Israel in response to arrests in the West Bank. Hamas hoped that these indirect attacks would spare Gaza from a direct assault, but it was already too late. The snowball effect had begun.

On July 17, Israel launched Operation “Protective Edge.” The campaign lasted 64 days.

With the operation underway, the Head of the Shin Bet, Yoram Cohen, met with Abu Mazen in Ramallah and presented the Palestinian leader with a disconcerting account of what he had learned from the interrogation of this latest group of Hamas prisoners. Hamas, it turned out, had been creating the clandestine infrastructure for an armed insurrection in the West Bank to topple the Fatah regime and assassinate its leaders. The information was so detailed that Abu Mazen was convinced of its veracity. This was just about the last straw. Any hope of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas was now seriously threatened.

In a last ditch-effort to rescue his government, on August 21 Abu Mazen flew to Qatar with his aide Saeb Erakat for a meeting with Meshaal and Mousa Abu Marzook, a prominent member of the Hamas Political Bureau. Also in attendance was Qatar’s Emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.

It was a very heated exchange. Abu Mazen confronted Meshaal directly, saying, “The arms and money you are smuggling into the West Bank are not to fight Israel but to overthrow the Palestinian Authority.” When he accused Hamas of orchestrating the abduction of the three Israeli teens and then lying to him about it, Meshaal responded, “I didn’t know about it then. Now we know more.”

Nevertheless, Abu Mazen decided not to dismantle the Unity Government. He recognized that the two movements were still at loggerheads, but he and Meshaal both understood that this was a marriage of necessity and there was no alternative.

After Operation "Protective Edge," Hamas needed Abu Mazen in order to rebuild Gaza, which had been devastated by the Israeli bombardment. The ceasefire agreement with Israel mediated by Egypt promised that the closure of Gaza would be eased and that the Rafah border crossing into Egypt would be reopened, but only under the supervision of the Palestinian Authority, controlled by Abu Mazen. Egypt had been adamant that there would be no compromise without Abu Mazen's involvement. According to the Egyptians, his government was the only stable element in the Palestinian leadership. Hamas was too closely aligned with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.

But Abu Mazen has his own reasons for keeping his Unity Government in place. His relationship with Hamas, as shaky as it may be, remains his only link to the 1.8 million Palestinians in Gaza. Terminating that connection would effectively mean the *de facto* partition of Palestine between Gaza and the West Bank. This would be unthinkable, especially as he is preparing for his last great battle: securing recognition of Palestine by the UN. Without at least the appearance of unity, there is very little chance that the United Nations will recognize an independent Palestinian state.