The Palestinian Issue Remains on the Agenda

Algerian officials met separately with the representatives of the Palestinian factions in mid-January to help pave the way for a comprehensive dialogue on the Palestinian reconciliation and end the division between Fatah and Hamas, which has controlled the Gaza Strip since 2007. The controversy began after the last Palestinian parliamentary elections in early 2006, which were followed by accusations from both sides in the nonobservance of the election results. This led to violent clashes between Hamas militants and the Palestinian Authority (PA) security bodies, which ended with Hamas in full control of Gaza now.

Algerian officials met with representatives of Fatah, followed by meetings with the representatives of Hamas. Both groups sent delegations to Algeria at the invitation of Algerian President Abdelmajid Tebboune. Other Palestinian groups also travelled to Algeria, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Islamic Jihad. They also met with Algerian officials in the hope of a breakthrough in reconciliation.

Algeria took the initiative after Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas visited Algeria in late December ahead of another Arab summit soon to be scheduled by the Arab League. Algeria hopes to reach progress on the issue. Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra said at a press conference behind the scenes of the meeting of Arab foreign
ministers in Kuwait, that “the road to Palestinian reconciliation has begun, and Algeria has a lot of experience in uniting the Palestinians.” Lamamra referred to his country's experience in holding meetings to settle the Fatah issue before the creation of the PA in 1994.

Egypt also plays the principal role in most of the Palestinian reconciliation efforts, including other issues on strengthening the Palestinian position. In recent years Egypt has been trying to bring the two sides closer through a series of meetings that leads to agreements and improve understanding between them, but the application of these agreements quickly fell apart due to the obstacles on both sides. This raises doubts as to whether the current round of talks will bring any notable results.

Saudi Arabia contributed to the conclusion of the Mecca Agreement in 2007, while Yemen also attempted to mediate under former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. So did Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, Russia and Turkey, but all these attempts failed. When asked whether the reconciliation talks would succeed this time, Al-Azhar University political science professor and former Palestinian minister of culture Ibrahim Abrash announced that he would hold no breath. "Why will the talks in Algeria be successful if they have not been successful during all these years since the controversy began?" he said to the Al-Ahram weekly. "A change of venue will not lead to successful negotiations."

“No Arab side has hindered the success of reconciliation. The problem lies with the Palestinians and whether a critical mass has been reached to end the differences. The invitation was sent by Algeria, not by the Palestinian political parties or factions demonstrating their determination for reconciliation. If there was genuine conviction for reconciliation, it would have happened on Palestinian soil without the need for outside mediators", he continued. “Algeria is acting cautiously and listening to all points of view, trying to bridge the gap. If there is any progress, a comprehensive dialogue could be proposed. But if complications arise, Algeria will not engage in dialogues that will end in failure”, he added.

He believed that Palestinian reconciliation had become a difficult problem, and that since the separation there had been a political class in Gaza and the West Bank that was not interested in bridging the gap. Abrash argued that Egypt must be present for true reconciliation. “It is the most important player in the Palestinian issue and a key element of any reconciliation agreement”, he added.

Following the last Israeli war in the Gaza Strip, Egypt invited the Palestinian groups to Cairo in May 2021 to discuss the differences, but their different agendas and prospects led to the failure of the effort before it even began. In December 2021, Hamas said it presented its vision for ending the disagreement to the Egyptian intelligence agency in charge of Palestinian reconciliation. This vision included revising the top national leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) to include all forces, factions and national leaders by means of elections. If elections were not possible for whatever reason, a national agreement would be reached to form an interim national leadership for a certain period as a transition phase to get ready for the general elections.

Hamas also wanted agreement on a national strategy at this stage, meaning consensus on the national political agenda and mechanisms for national, field and political action. Fatah refused, arguing that there was no need for new strategies and visions, and relied on what had already been agreed instead. It believes that the main obstacle lies in implementing the previous agreements rather than in reaching new agreements. Reconciliation was further complicated when, in early May 2021, Abbas issued a decree cancelling parliamentary, presidential and the Palestinian National Council elections because Israel refused to allow elections in occupied Jerusalem. The PA justified the decision on the grounds that occupied Jerusalem was the capital of the Palestinian state and elections could not be held without Jerusalem. Hamas, on the other hand, saw this move by Abbas as a way to evade elections and demanded elections, but without clarifying its position on Jerusalem.

Other complications on the road to reconciliation are the boycott by some factions of the meeting of the Palestinian National Council (PNC, the parliament for Palestinians at home and abroad), as required by the PLO charter, which is the highest executive body in Palestine from which the PA was created. The NPC should include representatives of all Palestinian factions and forces, as well as some key leaders. Hamas and Islamic Jihad said they would boycott the meeting, and the PFLP joined them. Meanwhile, Fatah, which controls the PLO, is moving ahead with the PNC meeting scheduled for February.

The gap between Fatah and Hamas is growing, making any mediation attempts to bridge their differences difficult. Abbas wants Hamas to declare its commitment to the principles of international legitimacy, which includes recognition of Israel, before the group can join any future Palestinian government. The PA chairman justified his position by expressing concern that if the agreement leads to Hamas, listed as a terrorist organisation by the EU and Britain, joining a Palestinian government, harsh economic sanctions could be imposed on that government because
Hamas does not recognise international resolutions.

Palestine relies not only on the support and assistance of the Arabs, but also of other countries friendly to it, most notably Russia in its struggle to establish its own state. That is why the Palestinian side support very actively and gratefully Russia's call for a ministerial meeting of the Middle East Quartet as soon as possible, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki told the UN Security Council.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has previously reiterated that Russia insists on a meeting of the Middle East Quartet (Russia, US, UN, EU) to help resume direct Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. The Palestinian side demands within the framework of a peace process with Israel, currently on hold, that future borders between the two sovereign states should follow the lines that existed before the Six Day War in 1967 with a possible exchange of territories. They hope to establish their state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and want East Jerusalem as its capital. Israel refuses to return to the borders that existed in 1967 or divide Jerusalem, which has been already declared its eternal and undivided capital. In this regard, it should be noted that former US President Donald Trump, the representative of the "great democracy", did his best to stall the Palestinian problem and fully supported the Israeli efforts to make Jerusalem fully theirs by declaring the city as the capital of the State of Israel.

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