

# The High Stakes of Unity

– interview with Hisham Ahmed

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AGAINST THE CURRENT: Let's begin with the new development, which is the announcement of the Palestinian unity government of Hamas and Fateh. How do Palestinians generally view this?

HISHAM AHMED: For Palestinian society at large, this declaration of a national unity government is a long-awaited development. Our society has suffered immensely in the past several months with clashes between the two leading parties, one religious and one secular.

The declaration of the agreement reached in Mecca, Saudi Arabia between these two leading parties has been welcomed by Palestinians in the Occupied Territories as well as in the diaspora. Now one has to see whether this government will function effectively as a unity government, or whether sub-governments will emerge within its structure. The concern is that internal politics might weaken this government and send a very negative picture to the outside world.

There is also concern that outside pressures and influences will continue to be exerted, particularly by the United States. In that case the national unity government will not be as effective as Palestinians wish it to be. The formation of this government, in a nutshell, is a very welcome step, but most Palestinians are cautiously hoping it will function effectively.

ATC: What would effective functioning mean specifically?

HA: The foremost concern is that this unity government must be efficient in addressing the needs of the population both economically and politically. This means providing the essential basic services – health care, social welfare, education, sanitation – as well as addressing the underlying political grievances such as Palestinian prisoners, the occupation, the horrible Wall that Israel has built on Palestinian land.

These are the expectations raised by the new unity government, that it will deal with these issues efficiently and effectively, smoothly carrying out governmental affairs and ridding Palestinian society of internal feuds.

ATC: Is it widely believed that there was outside manipulation of the violence between Fateh and Hamas? What's your own reading of this?

HA: We may never have irrefutable evidence. We do have circumstantial evidence leading us to believe that the factional violence was fuelled from within, but also from outside. There are both internal and external causes. For example, Israeli governments beginning with (then Prime Minister Binyamin) Netanyahu in 1998 had decided and rather publicly announced that they would

be pleased to see “Palestinians settle accounts between themselves,” meaning a Palestinian civil war.

There have been numerous occasions where Israeli forces have attempted to provoke Palestinians to violence against each other. An article published in 1983 by an Israeli intelligence officer who had worked with Mossad (Israel's espionage service) stated that the strategy for the 1990s would be to promote conflict and violence within Arab societies, and within Palestine to deepen splits between secular and Islamist forces.

Secondly, in writing my book about Hamas, I conducted interviews with officials and activists from the organization. One thing I got out of these interviews is that in 1987 when Hamas was formed, some of the activists who were summoned by Israeli officials – in Nablus, for example – found the military governor seeming rather desirous and hopeful that Hamas as a religious movement would become stronger and weaken the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). This of course was before the Madrid conference and the Israeli-PLO Oslo accords.

While that strategy didn't work out very well at the time of the first Intifada (although there were clashes in Gaza during 1994-95), such strategizing has apparently paid off particularly in 2006. For Israeli politicians and planners, insofar as the conflict is internalized in Palestinian society, the Israeli body politic is relieved of the burden of dealing with the issues.

Also, just before the Palestinian election of January 2006 we saw repeated announcements by both U.S. and Israeli officials, threatening Palestinian society that if they voted for the Islamists they would be punished by the cutoff of foreign aid. Not only was this interference in Palestinian affairs; it also heightened internal tensions, and indeed many people voted for the Islamists not because of their ideology but as a protest against this interference.

Certainly, however, these tensions themselves are fuelled by internal dynamics.

ATC: We noted that Mustafa Barghouti (a prominent independent popular movement figure, physician and outspoken advocate of democratic reform) is the Minister of Information in the unity government. Does this indicate he played a role in its formation?

HA: He and many others, in fact, have worked tirelessly to see to it that first, the clashes would stop, because this was a very negative period for Palestinian society; and he and others have exerted numerous efforts because the only way out of the crisis is a unity government. The outside world has seen the disunity as an opportunity to unleash an assault on the Palestinian population.

ATC: The year 2007 marks a tragic double anniversary of the 1947 partition of Palestine, leading to the disaster of 1948, and the 1967 war and 40 years of occupation. How is Palestinian society today viewing this compound catastrophe?

HA: Forty years after the 1967 war and the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, Palestinians find themselves pushed against the wall more than ever. Their agony is deeper than ever, and the international community has paid no more than lip service to their suffering.

Numerous international resolutions affirming inalienable Palestinian rights remain on paper, while Palestinians find themselves being strangled by the Apartheid Wall built on their land. That their

political representatives have been engaging in violent conflict with each other makes all this even worse.

## **The Absence of Arafat**

The fact that the question of Palestine seems to be on the back burner for the international community is exacerbated by the absence of a representative body for the Palestinian people ever since their foremost leader, Yasser Arafat, was assassinated. There is a psychological vacuum, a political vacuum, internal tensions and deepened frustration.

One would like to paint a more optimistic picture, but the fact is that the people's suffering is worse than ever. I have heard from elderly Palestinians that the year 2006 was even more painful than the 1967 war or the 1948 Nakba, of which next year of course marks the 60th anniversary.

Much of Palestinian society now lives in the diaspora, with the enormous complexities of living as refugee populations in the Arab world and elsewhere. And as was the case in 1949 and 1968, the international community views the Palestinian issue only as a "humanitarian issue."

So I have to say that the prognosis for Palestine today is difficult. In the 21st century, a people under occupation for so long deserve better.

ATC: Let's return to your reference to the assassination of Yasser Arafat. I gather that this is pretty open information in Israel, but many American readers may not realize it...

HA: Yes, it has been a much publicized story in Israel that Arafat was blood-poisoned. This is a very widespread feeling. I was there when Arafat fell ill. The dynamics leave no doubt in any rational mind that he was subjected to a plan to eliminate him – his treatment, the situation inside the Muqata (the besieged presidential headquarters in Ramallah – ed.), the conditions of his transfer to France, even the way the news of his health was handled.

The most disturbing question for many who gathered around the Muqata on the day he was buried was that here was a leader who had been targeted by so many assassination attempts, and yet no autopsy was performed.

The absence of Arafat could be considered one of the leading internal causes of the tensions between Hamas and Fateh. He used to be a unifying leader, respected not only by friends and supporters but by his opponents and foes. His absence left Palestinians in a state of anger and tension that was released in internal violence, and the entire society in a state of loss.

## **A Critical Moment**

ATC: After everything that has happened, is the demand for an independent state still the demand of Palestinian society? There's increasing debate over this.

HA: Certainly Palestinian society up to now would be content with a two-state solution – but every day of the occupation renders this weaker both politically and practically, especially with the construction of the awful Wall on Palestinian land. The physical prerequisites for a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza are almost destroyed – along with the lack of any contiguity (connection) between them.

Third, on the political level, increasing the repressive measures of the occupation contributes to the collective radicalization of Palestinian society. The two-state demand was the product of a generation of Palestinian nationalism, but its failure could produce a generation that is more radical.

We are already at a critical moment where, in the opinion of many Israeli and Palestinian analysts, the two-state solution is dead. I have argued, however, that the two-state idea could be revived – but only with creative, innovative and skillful leadership on both sides, and especially if there is a will among the Israeli leadership that the occupation must be undone.

Hamas in fact will go along with a two-state solution under these conditions. Sheikh Yassin (Hamas spiritual leader – ed.) before his assassination said that a Palestinian state within 1967 borders would be the basis for a 50-year hudna – truce – tantamount to mutual recognition in practice.

But to understand the situation properly requires a couple of words on the causes behind these recent violent confrontations. I was a witness to much of this.

The year 2005 was very volatile in Palestinian society, following the disappearance or assassination of Yasser Arafat the year before. There was a spiritual vacuum in many respects. There were also several rounds of municipal elections (in which Hamas gained ground –ed.), so that on the eve of the national elections of January 2006 it was clear that confrontations might take place.

On the night of the elections, one of the public opinion polling centers in Ramallah held a press conference announcing their projections that Fateh would win a landslide victory. As I was watching this announcement myself, it rang a warning bell for me – my reading of the situation was different, I didn't think the repressive policies of Sharon would help the secularists, nor that the rampant corruption within the Palestinian Authority would help Fateh.

In addition, such announcements were treated as if they were official results. We saw some supporters of Fateh conducting celebrations before official results were announced. I made some appeals to people in Fateh to please stop this, knowing that the official results in the morning would produce a reaction. And so it was.

I think it started right then – many Fateh people didn't accept that Hamas had won, and many Hamas people couldn't believe they had won. There was then a conflict between a party that couldn't reconcile itself to an electoral defeat, and the other party that was hungry to muster power. I believe this internal dynamic was intrinsic to the rise of the violence.

ATC: How high then are the stakes in the success or failure of the unity government?

HA: If the national unity government becomes dysfunctional or weakened, several possible scenarios can emerge.

The first is the Egyptian-Jordanian option, in which the international powers would turn to them to police Gaza and the West Bank respectively. (Jordanian) King Abdullah has warned of the dangers of not resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because he realizes what the consequences could be for his own kingdom if Palestinian society is destabilized.

The second scenario of course is that one more time, the Palestinian issue is shoved to the back burner if the Palestinians consume themselves in internal struggle.

But the third and most possible scenario, I think, is that deepening internal tensions and confrontations within Palestinian society, in the absence of a viable solution of the Israel-Palestine conflict, would lead to a further radicalization in which both Hamas and Fateh will be regarded as inefficient and ineffective.

We saw some hints of this scenario just recently, when the al-Qaeda leader Zawahiri sent his “condolences” to Hamas. The way I read this is that al-Qaeda might try to step in to present themselves as the alternative to Fateh and the “sellout” of Hamas.

This is a scenario to be taken seriously. And the only way out is creative, innovative and skillful leadership and strategy to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict – today rather than tomorrow.

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