



As Israel normalizes relations with the Arabsphere, can the Palestinians revive the Palestinian Question?

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Israel's normalizing relations with various Arab countries brought the Palestinians once again before the bitter realization that time is working against them. It appears that this realization triggered a process of reconciliation among the Palestinians. Yet, will these efforts suffice to influence the course of the Palestinian Question within a rapidly changing regional environment?

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While unofficial talks between the UAE and Israel have been an open secret for quite some time, the normalization of their relations last August, with Bahrain following suite in September and Sudan in October is paving an unprecedented reality for the Palestinians. The latter harshly condemned the normalizations as a break away from the Arab Peace Initiative—endorsed in 2002, re-affirmed in 2007 and 2017—which conditioned Arab states' normalization with Israel by establishing a Palestinian state and ending the occupation.¹ This may shed light on why the Emiratis attempted to justify the normalization as a diplomatic effort to halt the Israeli annexation of the West Bank. As neither Israeli nor US officials have bothered to substantiate it, UAE's justification fell short of convincing the Palestinians.² In practice, a suspension of the annexation means little—if nothing at all—when it is not accompanied by a genuine halt of the illegal Israeli settlement expansion in the West Bank. Be that as it may, the establishment of formal relations between Arab countries and Israel may be the last straw that breaks the camel's back for the Palestinians.

In response to the normalization announcements, two Palestinian leadership meetings took place to push forward with a unified national agenda. On September 3, all local heads of the Palestinian factions in Ramallah held a teleconference with their counterparts located in Beirut. Three committees were established to formulate proposals on a unified national strategy for peaceful popular resistance, reforms on the PLO, and reconciliation between Hamas and Fateh.³ On September 22, the second meeting took place between Hamas and Fatah delegations in Ankara. The two delegations agreed to proceed with reconciliation by holding three separate elections within the next six months; for the Palestine Legislative Council, the PA's Presidency, and the Palestine National Council. Although the moves could be considered as a breakthrough, they are neither unprecedented nor surprising. Reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah has been unsuccessfully attempted in 2007, 2011, 2012, and 2014.⁴ However, the determination level of both sides may be different now for various reasons.

Hamas, facing severe pressure by the suffocating situation in Gaza, seemingly focuses on dealing with the humanitarian crisis rather than the resistance. The latest Qatari-brokered ceasefire with Israel in the aftermath of the normalization deals and the demand for a larger cash injection from Doha are testaments to that.⁵ Being on bad terms with Fatah and the PLO, internationally branded as a terrorist organization, and totally dependent on a few, albeit steadfast, foreign backers (i.e., Qatar, Iran, Turkey), Hamas has little space for maneuvers. Therefore, apart from essentially restoring its participation in the Palestinian Authority (PA), a successful reconciliation with Fatah could enhance its international legitimacy and unlock access to more international humanitarian assistance for Gaza. After all, Hamas' recalibration is evident since 2017 and the presentation of its new political document. Since then, the organization accepts the formation of a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders, downplays its affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood, and affirms that its struggle is not religiously motivated against the Jews.⁶

Fatah is equally under severe pressure. Standoffs with Israel on clearance revenues, as well as a sharp decline in the aid coming from the Arab states (38\$ million in 2020 compared to 267\$ million in 2019), have crippled the West Bank's economy to the point of near collapse. The PA's retreat from all agreements with Israel following the release of the West Bank annexation plans, and the recession caused by the corona-crisis have also taken an enormous toll on a Palestinian economy.⁷ The economic predicament, coupled with the failure to attract the necessary international support, is reflected in the PA's and President Abbas' low approval rates.⁸ It is highly likely that more Arab countries will follow the normalization path if exposed to heavy US pressure. The fear of Morocco, Kuwait, and Oman changing course, reinforces Fatah's conviction that the survival of the Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation demands at least a unified Palestinian front. The Istanbul meetings probably reflect that conviction and imply considerable mobility that may this time bear results. But even if the two sides ultimately succeed to unite, will it suffice to revive the Palestinian Question on a regional and international level?

During the last decade, several events have generated new dynamics in the region, seriously affecting the Palestinian Question on the international political scene. The Arab uprisings of 2011-2012

saw several Arab states focusing on their immediate national security interests at the cost of relegating their commitment to the Palestinian cause. The growing rivalry with Iran, Turkey, and Qatar has led the UAE and Saudi Arabia to approach Israel as “the enemy of their enemy” and recalibrate their attitudes accordingly. Egypt’s el-Sisi, whose ascendance and consolidation on power reportedly owed much to Emirati support, seems to align with the Gulf on the matter. Furthermore, Cairo considers political Islamism (as expressed by Hamas), and the countries that support it (Turkey and Qatar), as a far greater threat than Israel.⁹ Syria, a traditionally sworn enemy of Israel, being consumed by a devastating civil war, is certainly not in a position to leverage anything in favor of the Palestinians. The same applies to Lebanon and Jordan, which face pressing political, economic, and social issues domestically. At this juncture, Trump’s overtly pro-Israel Middle Eastern policy and Netanyahu’s attempts to bypass the Palestinian issue in his Israel’s relations with the Arab world have indeed found fertile ground. The normalization deals and their endorsement by both Egypt and Saudi Arabia represent prime outcomes of the above-mentioned regional shifts.

In this context, the Palestinian support’s de-prioritization is reflected in the growing gap between the Arab states’ rhetoric and actions. Aside from the absence of concrete international pressure on Israel to stop the illegal settlement activities, the gap has become clearer from the mild reactions to the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and Trump’s “deal of the century”.¹⁰ Moreover, several allies of the Palestinian Question seem, at best, to move away from providing genuine support, and at worst, to engage in pressure tactics aiming to push the Palestinians to adapt to new realities. On the one hand, the Qatari financial lifejacket that keeps Gaza from plummeting into humanitarian chaos cannot be in itself considered genuine support for the Palestinian cause. Given Erdogan-Netanyahu abysmal relations, Turkey’s political backing of Hamas and recently -to a certain extent- Fatah, also reflects its regional aspirations rather than genuine support for the Palestinians. On the other hand, reportedly discrediting media campaigns in the Saudi and Egyptian press and a massive decline of Arab financial aid to the PA further tighten the noose on the totally dependent Palestinians.¹¹

And here comes the paradox of the Palestinian international position’s predicament. While the Palestinian question remains not at the epicenter of the Arab elites’ priorities, yet several key players want and apply pressure for a heavy hand in it, in ways that the Palestinians cannot ignore. Notably, the disenfranchisement with Turkey’s choice as a host country for the unity talks is evident. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan have reportedly rejected the Istanbul agreements. The Palestinians are aware of their dependency both on adversarial foreign backers and the US as a ‘biased’, albeit powerful mediator. The PA’s efforts to appease the Saudis and the Egyptians after the Istanbul meetings, along with its hope for imminent changes in the White House, stand as proof of that.¹²

In a nutshell, the normalization between Israel and a number of key Arab states has reminded the Palestinians that unity is an urgent matter. Still, official statements guarantee neither reconciliation nor unity. Yet, given the current critical juncture for both Gaza and Ramallah, the conditions are ironically there. In any case, even if elections do happen and the Palestinians decide on a unified strategy to revive the Palestinian Question, the role of the international factor will remain catalytic. Countries with vested interests on the Palestinian issue can very well influence its trajectory. Given Fateh’s and Hamas’ overwhelming external dependency, they both need to balance between their international backers while tempering their own expectations. Notwithstanding, one thing is certain; if today’s dynamics remain unchanged, with Trump and Netanyahu on the one side and the rest of the region prioritizing their own affairs on the other, the Palestinian Question may become even more marginalized on an international level amidst the on-going occupation.

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