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Policy Brief

Gaza: Palestinian and regional calculations

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Israel aspires to take advantage of the stances of Arab regional powers to contain Hamas, but it will avoid pressuring the movement to relinquish its weapons, as this might risk frustrating the entire recent agreement [Getty Images]

Introduction

In Cairo, on 17 September 2017, Fatah and Hamas reached a new reconciliation deal. The agreement calls for the formation of a national unity government, presidential and parliamentary elections, elections for the National Council of the PLO, and the restructuring of the security apparatus. The agreement should pave the way for an end to internal Palestinian divisions and the lifting of the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip since 2006. As part of the new agreement, Hamas has dissolved the administrative committee that oversees governance in the Gaza Strip on its behalf in order to allow the Ramallah government to exercise its authorities in the Strip. This effectively freezes understandings reached between Hamas and Mohammed Dahlan, a former Fatah leader.

Given that seven previous agreements reached under Arab auspices and through Palestinian efforts have failed the test of implementation, many questions surround the latest deal and its chances for successful follow through.

The fate of the reconciliation, and other actions seeking to change the political environment in Gaza, is made murkier by dramatic transformations in the region, in particular the Gulf crisis, which has exposed a major regional rift, as well as signs of a strategic partnership between Israel and some Arab parties.

Past reconciliation attempts demonstrate that two major factors are vital to determining the fate of the agreement: first, the divergent calculations of Palestinian actors and their different political and ideological affiliations; and second, the incompatible interests of regional forces with influence over Palestinian parties and the nature of their relationship with Israel.

So how do Palestinian parties view the latest action seeking to end the division? What factors determine regional forces' stance on the reconciliation agreement? And what is the most possible outcome of the actions seeking to change the political environment in the Gaza Strip?

The considerations of domestic actors

The most recent reconciliation agreement gives shape to the common interests between Hamas, on one hand, and Fatah and the Palestinian Authority (PA), on the other. Hamas has a greater interest in ending the internal rift because it will relieve itself from responsibility for the steep costs of administering the Gaza Strip, due especially to the siege, which has severely damaged the economy and is on the brink of totally paralysing the service sector. Conditions have been exacerbated by the sanctions imposed by President Mahmoud Abbas in April 2017, designed to pressure Hamas to relinquish control of the Strip and dissolve the administrative committee. The sanctions included salary cuts to civil servants in the Strip and forced early retirement for thousands; the PA also stopped financing the purchase of fuel used in the Gaza Strip's sole electrical plant.

The Hamas leadership tried to evade Abbas's dictates by reaching an understanding with the latter's bitter enemy, Mohammed Dahlan, the former leader expelled from Fatah who enjoys Egyptian and Emirati support. This understanding was to facilitate an accord between the parties based on the joint administration of the Gaza Strip, but Hamas leaders apparently realised that the agreement with Dahlan could not alleviate the siege or reduce the impact of Abbas's sanctions. Hamas thus had to face one of two choices: either respond to Abbas's demand to renounce governance in the Strip by dissolving the administrative committee, or risk another face-off with Israel to absorb popular anger in Gaza, whose inhabitants hold Israel partly responsible for the deteriorating economy.

Hamas ultimately chose reconciliation with Abbas, believing that confrontation with Israel in light of prevailing regional, international, and domestic conditions would only undermine its political position, inflict grave harm on its military infrastructure, and exacerbate already poor socioeconomic conditions in the Gaza Strip. The reconciliation also deprives Israel of pretexts for continuing to sap Hamas's military strength by striking out at Hamas in response to mortars or rockets fired by other Palestinian factions. Tel Aviv sees Hamas as the sole authority in the Strip, which therefore must pay a duty for any military action initiated from the Strip, regardless of who launches it.

Abbas also needs the agreement with Hamas, especially after the latter accepted his conditions, in order to thwart the development of any political environment that could help Dahlan improve his domestic standing with the support of regional powers. At the

same time, an internal reconciliation means that the West Bank and Gaza Strip will again be a single political entity, which will give Abbas more latitude for action in international forums and enable him to move forward with the strategy of internationalising the conflict. Thus far, Israel has continued to argue that Abbas cannot represent the PA as the president since the Gaza Strip is outside PA control.

Arab forces and Israel: making gains that war could not

Since any Palestinian agreement to end internal divisions requires some Arab framework to support it politically and economically; the alignments and interests of regional forces exercise much influence over actions designed to achieve Palestinian interests. Geography has always given Egypt a singular influence over any reconciliation agreement to end Gazans' plight because Egypt controls the Gaza Strip's sole outlet to the world through the Rafah crossing. Without a guarantee that the agreement will lead to the opening of the crossing, the siege will persist. Egypt, which was unable to ensure the success of the Dahlan-Hamas understanding, is nevertheless able to thwart the latest Cairo deal if its own regime's interests and regional and international preferences are not taken into account. Egypt views the reconciliation agreement through two primary lenses:

The first is how the agreement will affect Hamas's fulfillment of its security obligations to Cairo, most importantly, ensuring that Gaza will not become the source of a security threat in Sinai.

The second lens is the Sisi regime's regional alignments and the nature of its partnership with Israel. The eruption of the Gulf crisis spurred the Sisi regime to push Hamas to abandon its special ties with Qatar and Turkey, offering to have the Gulf states blockading Qatar step in and assume Doha's role in financing most reconstruction projects in the Gaza Strip. Although Abbas was able to forestall the Hamas-Dahlan understanding that would have formed the political framework guaranteeing Hamas's split from its regional allies, the Sisi regime is betting that it can use Egypt's weight to compel Abbas to accept a major role for Dahlan in the Strip.

There are some signs that Cairo is attempting to bring other Gulf parties into the Gaza Strip through Dahlan, in tandem with pressure on the Palestinian resistance in the Strip from Arab parties and Israel designed to turn the Gaza resistance into a copy of the PA. Some Israeli national security think tanks have advocated exploiting the Gulf crisis and taking advantage of the weight of the states boycotting Qatar, especially the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to entice Hamas into abandoning its military force; in exchange, the UAE would fund the reconstruction projects currently overseen by Qatar. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently referred to "unprecedented developments" in Tel Aviv's relations with several Arab states that do not maintain diplomatic ties with Israel.

This increases the chances that the axis of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain will mobilise to deploy its political and economic weight to push Hamas to abandon its military force.

In other words, Egypt and its Gulf allies may help Israel achieve what it could not accomplish through the three gruelling wars it launched upon the Gaza Strip.

Future of the Iranian, Qatari and Turkish roles

Although Hamas faces some difficult choices due to its need to offload the costs of governing Gaza, which has been made worse by the siege, past experience shows that the movement sees the preservation of its military capacity and the conditions that ensure its maximisation as non-negotiable. Any Arab-Israeli attempt, therefore, to use the internal reconciliation and the lifting of the siege to compel Hamas to renounce its weapons may falter before major obstacles that Israel, with all its might, has been unable to overcome.

Attempting to keep more options open, Hamas resumed its ties with Iran. Movement leaders have publicly stated that Tehran is providing material support to reinforce Hamas's military wing. In its desire to strengthen relations with Iran, Hamas has also reassessed its stance on the Syrian conflict. As reported by Asharq al-Awsat on 29 August 2017, Yahya Sinwar, a Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip, said that his movement had no objection to improving relations with the regime of Bashar al-Assad. In fact, Hamas has also moved to strengthen cooperation and coordination with Hezbollah, as reflected in a series of meetings that brought together leadership from both movements in Beirut, which has given refuge to several Hamas leaders.

In addition, both Qatar and Turkey are currently carrying out major reconstruction projects in Gaza without imposing any political conditions on Hamas or other Palestinian parties. Hamas is presumably well aware of the import of statements made by Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir shortly after the onset of the Gulf crisis, when he made any reform of relations with Qatar conditional on it cutting its ties with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, which he described as 'terrorist groups'. Thus, although Hamas must engage with Egypt to persuade it to alleviate the impact of the siege and not obstruct Palestinian reconciliation, its strategic interests require it not to give up its special ties with Qatar and Turkey. In particular, the Hamas leadership abroad and in the West Bank has reservations about any regional actions that could have a negative impact on relations with Qatar and Turkey. Even if the reconciliation agreement is successful and the reins of power pass to the Ramallah government, the PA itself has no interest in seeing Gulf states intervene in the Gaza Strip in a way that bolsters Dahlan.

In the event of an attempt by US President Donald Trump and his administration – with Israel and the axis of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain – to push for a regional solution that would normalise Israeli-Arab relations before a resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians, all Palestinian forces, including Fatah, will need backing from other regional forces – including Iran, Qatar and Turkey – to confront this attempt.

The fate of the reconciliation

Despite the divergent interests and calculations of Palestinian and influential regional parties, the recent deal is more likely to succeed than fail due to the overriding common interests of the divided parties and Israel's fear of explosive security conditions in the Gaza Strip if the economy continues to deteriorate. The first sign of progress will be the return of the Palestinian government to Gaza and the return of the Presidential Guard to supervise the Rafah crossing with Egypt.

Israel aspires to take advantage of the stances of Arab regional powers to contain Hamas, but it will avoid pressuring the movement to relinquish its weapons, as this might risk frustrating the entire recent agreement. Tel Aviv realises that undermining the Cairo agreement means setting the stage for another damaging military confrontation with Hamas. Since the eruption of the first intifada in late 1987, Israel has never enjoyed such an extended period of calm on its southern border with Gaza as it has since the end of the 2014 war. Israel thus has no interest in provoking a face-off with Hamas, especially now, amid the uncertain situation on its northern border, given the heavy influence of Iran and Hezbollah in Syria and the tide turning in favour of the Assad regime.

Tel Aviv may be willing to show more flexibility toward the demand that Hamas lay down its weapons, choosing instead to restrict and regulate them, now that the Egyptian army has successfully destroyed the tunnels between the Gaza Strip and Egypt and reinforced security in the border zone. This has greatly undermined the ability of the Palestinian resistance to smuggle in weaponry.