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A failed peace process?

The rapprochement between Hamas and Fatah and the consequences of the announced relocation of the US Embassy

by *Janina Wietschorke and Stefan Lukas*

In the Palestinian territories, two camps with very different objectives have formed. While moderate Fatah under Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has the upper hand in the West Bank, radical Islamic Hamas has ruled the Gaza Strip since 2006. After many failed attempts to put an end to this division of Palestine, opportunities for rapprochement between the two camps were emerging and, for the time being, there was hope for a new peace process with Israel. Are both now at risk of failing in the wake of the US government's announcement that it would recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move its embassy to Jerusalem?

The overall political climate brought Hamas and Fatah closer together

In May 2011, Fatah and Hamas signed a reconciliation agreement in Cairo under which they both planned to form a joint transitional government with the goal of creating an independent, sovereign Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. At the time, both Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh were convinced of the need for Palestinian reconciliation. The agreement was not pursued any further, but is now to serve as a basis and reference document for the new reconciliation talks that are currently underway, at least in those passages that achieved consensus in 2011. The measures adopted include, for example, the reactivation of the Palestinian Legislative Council, the formation of a unity government and the holding of parliamentary and presidential elections. The chances of a breakthrough initially seemed good this time, as Hamas can only rely on foreign support to a limited extent at the moment and is not able to govern Gaza without Fatah's help, while, in turn, new possibilities for negotiations with Israel would open up for Palestinian President Abbas.

The most decisive factor in the Palestinian players' decision to agree to a common compromise was the political climate that had developed since the Arab Spring in 2011. While the Palestinians had initially hoped that the change in many Arab states would also have a positive influence on their own position in relation to Israel, these hopes were disappointed with the removal of the then Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi from office in spring 2013, if not earlier. Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who was supported mainly by Qatar and Turkey, had been an advocate of Hamas in the Gaza Strip and tolerated the emergence of more radical groups in Gaza, including the Islamic Jihad Movement *Harakat al-dschihād al-islāmī*.

But the overthrow of Morsi by the military under Abd al-Fattah as-Sisi also changed the conditions for Hamas and the Gaza Strip. First, the important Rafah Border Crossing was closed on the Egyptian side, and since 2014, Egypt has been classifying Hamas as a terrorist organisation. For Hamas, this had two consequences: Firstly, it lost one of its most important advocates in the region in Morsi, which among other things strengthened the position of Fatah; secondly, there was the threat of a logistical and humanitarian emergency, since important supplies could no longer reach the Gaza Strip via the Sinai. In 2015, Cairo even had the Palestinian tunnel system below the border to Egypt flooded so as to put even more pressure on Hamas.

Another problem that weakened the position of Hamas among the Palestinians was its turning away from its formerly most important ally, Bashar al-Assad, in 2013. With the support of Iran, Damascus had until then not only been a safe haven for the Hamas' government-in-exile under Ismail Haniyeh, but also one of its major financiers. Shortly after the Hamas leaders had spoken out against the Syrian ruler in the course of the protests against Assad, they had to leave the country for Qatar and Tunisia. After the loss of these former allies, with the exception of some major private donors from the Gulf States, Hamas was left with only Turkey, Iran (as brokered by Hezbollah) and Qatar as official partners in the region.

However, the conflict between Hamas and Fatah is also strongly influenced by the power struggle between the regional players. While Hamas obtains its funds primarily from the above-mentioned states, Fatah receives ideological and material support in particular from their antagonists in the region – above all Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. In addition, the power struggle that erupted in 2015 between Qatar and other states on and outside the Arabian peninsula has also adversely affected the situation of Hamas, as Qatar has been coming under economic pressure itself owing to the blockade imposed by the other Gulf Cooperation Council states and no longer has the funds to support Palestinians for the Gaza Strip. This also affected the negotiations between Hamas and Fatah, as the Egyptian government did not recognise the results of the negotiations that had taken place in Doha under the mediation of Qatar. In summary, the possibility of rapprochement between the two Palestinian parties can be attributed to the political and, in particular, economic weakness of Hamas, which has come under increasing pressure – largely because of the deteriorating humanitarian and economic situation of the population in Gaza City.

Gaza's plight and its consequences

The Gaza Strip has been the scene of numerous military clashes between Israel and the Palestinian groups and in 2012, a United Nations report predicted that in view of these conditions it would be uninhabitable by 2020 at the latest. After the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the coastal strip they had occupied since 1967, Hamas seized control of the area in 2006 in bloody clashes with Fatah. About 1.7 million people live under very poor humanitarian conditions in the strip, which spans 40 km. Unemployment is at more than 40 percent; there is electricity for only four hours a day to put pressure on Hamas, and the drinking water is highly polluted. After Hamas' victory, Israel and Egypt largely sealed off their borders with the Gaza Strip, as Hamas, unlike Fatah, does not recognise the State of Israel and regularly fires missiles into Israeli territory. The situation is also aggravated by the fact that countless young people in Gaza, who have no prospects, are easily won over by radical Islamic groups with the promise of money and freedom of movement. A rapprochement between Fatah and Hamas would offer the chance of handing over the administration of the Gaza Strip to Fatah, and thus the prospect of significantly improving the living conditions of the population and countering the radicalisation of the youth.

While Hamas continues to pursue the goal of eliminating the state of Israel by military means, Fatah recognised Israel's right to exist in 1993 under its then chairman Yasser Arafat as part of the Oslo peace process, renounced terrorism as a political instrument and has become internationally recognised. Although Fatah and thus the Palestinian Authority is often criticised for corruption and nepotism, it is still Israel's only recognised negotiating partner among the Palestinians. A rapprochement between the two groups would also mean a more moderate course for Hamas, making it possible for Israel to negotiate with both Palestinian camps in the long term.

Even within Israeli society, a rapprochement between the two organisations could change perceptions. There, too, opinions on this issue are very controversial. A large part of the population, especially the younger generation, would like to see an improvement of the situation in Palestine and is in favour of a peace process, both between the Palestinian camps and with Israel. This is, however, opposed mainly by conservative and ultra-orthodox Israelis, who reject any negotiations with the Palestinians and who, above all, support Israel's settlement policy in the West Bank. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a right-wing conservative, has repeatedly stressed that Israel would oppose any reconciliation unless it included international agreements, the recognition of Israel and the demilitarisation of Hamas. From his point of view, a rapprochement between Hamas and Fatah would diminish the prospects of peace. The division is strategically advantageous for Israel's current policy as it is not faced with one united party to the conflict. If an agreement were to be reached between the two Palestinian factions, the argument that the Palestinian Authority is not a full negotiating partner, which is sometimes made in this respect, would no longer be justifiable. The decisive factor for the Israeli government in this context is, however, that the military wing of Hamas would not receive a boost through this.

Trump's play with fire

With the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel, US President Trump has triggered developments in the region which will have a negative impact on the regional peace process both in the short and, very likely, in the long term. While the right-wing conservative Israeli government under Prime Minister Netanyahu had welcomed Trump's step, the announcement caused an outcry of varying intensity in the Arab world and elsewhere. While American allies such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan displayed moderate anger, other states in the Middle East, especially Iraq, Syria and Turkey, showed open resistance in the form of protests and public announcements by their governments. Even key religious institutions such as the Egyptian Al-Azhar University or the head of the Coptic Church warned the US government and even cancelled consultations with US representatives which had long been planned. Trump's decision will also have serious consequences for the rapprochement between Hamas and Fatah. After representatives of both parties had met in Cairo on 3 December 2017 as arranged by the Egyptian intelligence service and the chances of rapprochement seemed to have improved, this process could now come to an abrupt end. Two possible scenarios, with differing degrees of probability, are conceivable:

Scenario One is a potentially militant coalition between both organisations following a radicalisation of Fatah as a result of the relocation of the US embassy. In the past, Fatah has seen much resistance especially among the more radical Palestinians, as evidenced among other things by the 2006 Palestinian elections. Hamas in particular could benefit from the move, as the relocation of the embassy strengthens the more extreme forces among the Arabs. However, the probability of this scenario is relatively small, since Hamas is still under political and economic pressure by Egypt and the Fatah government is very unlikely to bow to Hamas.

Scenario two is therefore much more likely, in which the status quo will ultimately be maintained although the potential for conflict will increase considerably. The status quo in this context is mainly upheld by two circumstances: Firstly, the current Palestinian Authority is largely dependent on external resources, such as funding by the United Nations. If the Fatah government under Mahmoud Abbas were to take an open stand against Israel and its ally the United States, most of the United Nations funds would dry up following pressure by the United States, which would have dramatic consequences for the Palestinians. As a result, the Fatah leadership has extremely little room for manoeuvre in counteracting US and Israeli interests. Even if Abbas has announced that he can do without US funds, it must not be forgotten that Fatah in particular is dependent on funds from the United Nations and other Arab states, most of which cooperate closely with the United States and, more recently, with Israel.

Secondly, the status quo is being upheld by the now unlikely demilitarisation of Hamas. The strongest military arm of Hamas, the Al-Qassam Brigades headed by Mohamed Deif, was a particular thorn in the side of both Israel and Fatah and was to be disarmed in the course of Palestinian rapprochement. With the announced relocation of the US embassy, a demilitarisation of Hamas has moved beyond reach for the time being, rendering the rapprochement process under the conditions of October 2017 de facto obsolete.

Trump's decision to relocate the embassy undoubtedly affects the originally planned peace processes. The extent of the resulting changes remains to be seen. Nevertheless, new realities are already being created on the ground, which require a rethink on the international scene. The situation between Hamas and Fatah, however, has remained unchanged so far and any hope for a possible peace process seems to have vanished. Both the Palestinian and the Israeli sides have left little doubt that they have no interest in genuine peace talks and that this will not change in the short or medium term. Measures like the Intifada called by Hamas or the construction of more than 1,100 new dwellings in the West Bank by the Israelis serve to reinforce this impression.

It can therefore be established that the United States' move to relocate the embassy has made one development likely in particular: the suspension of rapprochement between Hamas and Fatah. However, the wider implications will only become apparent in the years to come. Through Trump's decision, one thing has become particularly clear, and not only for the Palestinian side: For the first time since the outbreak of the Middle East conflict, the United States can no longer be considered a neutral mediator between the players. Further steps taken by the Trump administration such as the cutting of direct US subsidies to the Palestinian Authority or the complete cancellation of US funding for the UN's Relief Agency for Palestine Refugees underline this fact. In the years to come, therefore, the issue of increasing radicalisation in parts of the societies involved and the need for a neutral mediator between the parties will be major challenges, which will only be met by means of considerable diplomatic and political efforts.

Stefan Lukas is a lecturer at the University of Greifswald, currently pursuing a doctorate in recent history focusing on German-Middle East relations. Janina Wietschorke is a student of area studies at the Humboldt University of Berlin. Both worked as course assistants at the Federal Academy for Security Policy in 2017/2018. This article reflects the authors' personal opinions.