

**"Ramifications of the continued state of internal division in the
Palestinian political system"**

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Introduction

The effects of the internal Palestinian division are still apparent on the overall aspects of political, economic and social life. Ending this division and its ramifications has become a principle point in political positions and actions of various Palestinian parties at the internal and regional levels. The ramifications of this division continue to interact at the internal, regional and external levels at a time when the efforts for dialogue to reinstate national unity and close the internal Palestinian divide have preoccupied most political and factional actions today including Arab – Egyptian especially – efforts to this end.

Furthermore, there are a number of differences in interests and visions among Palestinians on ways to end this division, especially concerning a number of files proposed at the dialogue table, such as the government files, the security services and the reshaping of the PLO.

The continued split, especially in light of the Israeli invasion on the Gaza Strip and the subsequent phase, greatly affected the regional and international differences and positions. This was particularly true in terms of the funds slated for the reconstruction of Gaza, which became another point of contention and which prevented this funding process from beginning. Each party in the internal conflict insisted on their right to oversee the reconstruction process, which delayed the process altogether. Hence, the only way to jumpstart this process was linked to reaching internal Palestinian unity between the conflicting parties.

The effects of this split were compounded by the rise of the Israeli right after winning Israel's most recent elections. This had an adverse effect on the political process in light of the new and stringent Israeli conditions towards negotiations with the Palestinians and its commitment to the international vision for resolution to the conflict on the basis of two states. The split has also weakened the Palestinian position, even before the Israeli elections and gave an additional excuse for the Netanyahu government to refuse the international vision of a two-state solution.

A number of files are intertwined with the internal division file, especially the crossings, truce and prisoner exchange with Gilad Shalit along with those on national conciliation and reconstruction funds. These are all interlinked files, some directly with local and regional dimensions, especially Egyptian and Israeli (border crossings and Shalit) while others are indirectly linked with regional and international files.

Ramifications of the division locally, regionally and internationally

There are increasing calls for Palestinian conciliation in both parts of the homeland in addition to other Palestinian, Arab and even international voices calling for this, in particular, the UN Secretary General and the EU which have both called for national conciliation along with Palestinian civil society circles, parties and factions. They have all pressed for achieving conciliation in order to confront Israel's policies and also to meet the obligations of reconstruction efforts in Gaza and the Palestinian parliamentary and presidential elections. Nonetheless, none of these calls have come to fruition on the ground. Hence, most of the proposed files on the dialogue table are disputed with no close agreement on any of them in sight. This is an indication of how deep the disputes really are in spite of the local and Egyptian attempts and initiatives to reach at least a minimum level of conciliation.

On the ground, despite the start of dialogue sessions and mutual calls to calm the situation so these efforts could succeed, arrests and harassment of Fateh supporters in the Gaza Strip have continued. Also security services continue to impinge on Hamas activities in the West Bank even if at a lower intensity. Furthermore, mutual media campaigns against the other continued even if these were less harsh than before. The harshest suffering at this time as a result of this situation, especially its ramifications on the economic, social and political levels, was most apparent on the people of the Gaza Strip. The policies of Hamas in the Gaza Strip have taken an institutionalized shape and form in light of the reinforced control the movement has over the Gaza Strip and its citizens' affairs.

The division has also stunted the work of the Palestinian parliament. The internal political arena witnessed a noticeable absence of any official parliamentary activity throughout this period of division even though there were initiatives for minimal parliamentary work in the West Bank and legislative work in the Gaza Strip by Hamas' parliamentary bloc, which has remained legally questionable.

At the government level, the fate of the current government depends on the agreement of those negotiating in Cairo. The resignation of Salam Fayyad's government represented symbolic support for the dialogue efforts while still continuing its duties in anticipation of the outcome of the dialogue sessions.

Regionally, the decisions of the Arab summit in Doha, the preceding economic summit in Kuwait and the second meeting in Doha were all in support of the efforts to achieve Palestinian national conciliation to end the state of division, but which also showed the differences in the stances of Arab countries in holding this or that party responsible. Furthermore, the Arab countries maintained Egypt's position as the sponsor of these talks and to follow up on this file as a representative of the Arab bloc. The insinuations that more than one Arab party is necessary to sponsor the internal Palestinian dialogue along with Cairo were disregarded since Egypt was given the mandate by the rest of the Arabs for this purpose. Moreover, Arabs and regional players continued to take sides, which impacted the positions of local parties. This also contributed to deepening the split, which manifested itself in the regional and Arab competitions and struggles, especially between the Egyptian/Jordanian/Saudi camp, which supports the Palestinian Authority and its President Mahmoud Abbas and the Syrian/Qatar camp that supports Iran and Hamas.

As for Israel, the division provides a perfect excuse for the Netanyahu government and his foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman to reject any relationship with the Palestinians and Arabs on the basis of negotiations towards reaching a comprehensive political and peaceful solution. This government, which has begun to face international opposition, especially European and American, because of its positions towards the political process, has used the division as an excuse to claim that it has no Palestinian partner. Also, because of the weakness of the PA, it found a way of evading its political obligations. Meanwhile, Netanyahu began to divert attentions away from the political process through hinting at a so-called economic peace or economic development for the Palestinians, giving this second option priority for Israel after the "Iran threat."

Because the file of Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier held captive in the Gaza Strip, is linked to the overall situation in the Strip, Israel will not open the crossings without his release. Furthermore, everything indicates to the fact that the Netanyahu government is in no rush to close this file or reach a prisoner exchange deal. Also, Hamas and Israel seek to maintain the state of calm in the Gaza Strip since both have an interest in this at present.

Future scenarios

None of the parties wants to take responsibility for the failure of the talks. Egypt does not want the current talks to fail under its sponsorship and on its turf either so one of the expected scenarios at the internal level is that the dialogue process will continue without reaching an agreement that could be translated on the ground and would end the current state of division. Or, the situation could develop from efforts to end the division to efforts to manage this division. The third scenario is that two separate governments in the West Bank and Gaza will continue under a higher committee to manage Palestinian affairs, which is another floating proposal.

At the popular level, the danger— especially in the Gaza Strip – is mostly affecting the youth sector given the desperation in which they live and also because of the glaring threat of the deteriorating community culture there.

This division could actually become the protective shield Israel needs to counter international pressures to recognize and commit to the international vision of two states. Halting the smuggling of weapons into the Strip and freeing Gilad Shalit are two points Israel uses as excuses to evade its obligations in the political process. They are also conditions Netanyahu is putting before making any progress at the political level especially in terms of lifting the siege on Gaza.

Israel is seeking to reinforce this division through cementing the reality of a mini-state in besieged Gaza while leaving the West Bank at the mercy of settlements, thus turning it into isolated cantons, multiplying the number and size of settlements and confiscating more land in Jerusalem. This facilitates the achievement of Israel's strategic goals.

Options and Alternatives:

Palestinian options and alternatives are limited in light of the internal division and the rise of the right-wing Netanyahu government to power in Israel. This is in spite of the current positive initiatives coming from Washington represented in the change from a Republican administration to a democratic

one under Barack Obama. Still, the developments in the internal Palestinian situation will not doubt be affected by the different pulls, differences and interests both regionally and in the Arab world.

- Locally: conciliation between Fateh and Hamas and all the others talking in Cairo for an agreement on a national unity government remains a national priority and ending the division is still an official and popular demand. Nonetheless, the dialogue has remained stagnant and needs more pressure, perhaps Egyptian, Arab or internal through popular actions backed by other Palestinian political powers.

In terms of the importance of popular action to end this state of division, the circumstances do not guarantee that such actions will take place. This is because of the frustrations felt by the people. Here the role of civil society is prominent in monitoring the performance of the government and holding it accountable in light of the defunct role of the PLC.

- Politically: continuing to maintain the independence of the national decision and protecting it from external interferences is vital. Taking advantage of the positive signals coming from the new US administration is very important in light of initiatives to exert international pressure on the Netanyahu government, the features of which will become clearer in the future, should it remain rejectionist in its attitude towards the international and American vision of a two state solution.

In the face of this exposed position by the Netanyahu government, it is best for the Palestinians to adhere to the current international position based on international resolutions and the two-state solution and ending the occupation. They should also stress on the principle of reciprocity in dealing with Israel in terms of recognition, in committing to international legitimacy and to the peace process, especially the results of the Annapolis conference and all the commitments and agreements that preceded it. The Palestinians must also communicate this position to the international community and to influential international parties, especially the United States and European Union.

In return, Israel's aim to reinforce the separation will only escalate through its continued execution of its strategy, particularly by turning the West Bank into islands and cantons and by isolating Jerusalem with the racist separation wall and settlements while also keeping the Gaza Strip besieged. This way, it can kill any chance of establishing a fully sovereign, contiguous and independent Palestinian state on all Palestinian lands.

Recommendations:

1. Keeping reconstruction and unity as top priorities so as to prevent the dialogue from becoming a continuous process without reaching any tangible results that could end the state of division. This should be achieved through holding presidential and parliamentary elections through which the people have their say, which would also be a direct introduction to the reconstruction process in the Gaza Strip.
2. Creating popular action that would greatly contribute to putting pressure on the parties and putting and end to the division along with the necessary pressure from the other forces and civil society institutions in this direction.

3. Working to find a mechanism for monitoring the government and holding it accountable in light of the defunct work of the PLC; also to work towards developing institutional work.
4. Bringing more attention to the national cause and program and focusing discussions on ways in which to end the occupation and achieve self determination; also to review the current peace process and formulate sufficient plans and policies to confront the right-wing Israeli government.
5. Working towards bolstering international pressure on Israel and its current government and taking advantage of the positive American signals towards the political process; adhering to the two-state solution and coordinating at the Arab and international levels in this context.
6. Reviewing everything that has been achieved over the recent period at the level of negotiations with Israel and insisting on the principle of reciprocity in commitments with it.