

PALESTINIAN RECONCILIATION: A STEP TOWARDS PEACE AND DEMOCRACY



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Palestinian activists across the Gaza Strip and the West Bank stage a day of massive demonstrations to call for reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah in Gaza, on 18 March 2011

The reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, mediated by the Egyptian transitional government, is an important step on the path towards peace and democracy. Without it, no agreement on the creation of a Palestinian democratic state living side by side with Israel had any chance of success for a number of reasons. Firstly, lasting peace cannot be made with those who represent only half of the Palestinian community. Secondly, to see any successful negotiation with Israel through, the Palestinians need to be in a position of strength; divided, they were in a position of extreme weakness. Finally, the reconciliation agreement will lead to elections that will give Palestinian negotiators renewed legitimacy and will create the conditions for the birth of a new democratic state in the Middle East.

In 2006, Palestinians were at the forefront of the democratisation movement in the Arab world.

The election process, which proceeded in accordance with the law and was recognised by the international community including EU observers as free and fair (the initial statement issued by the EU declared that Palestinians had voted 'democratically and peacefully') returned Hamas instead of Fatah, as had been widely expected. The election results were subsequently not recognised. Aside from shattering the EU's credibility, this has caused much added suffering to the Palestinians, particularly those living in the Gaza Strip who since then have endured the 2009-2010 war and a five-year long blockade.

Another complicating factor was the official rhetoric of many Arab authoritarian regimes, notably Egypt, whose attempts at brokering Palestinian unity were consistently undermined by its anti-Hamas bias. There is an entirely new situation in the Arab world today. The end of the Mubarak regime, has brought Egypt much closer to the Palestinians. It was already clear that there is no longer any support in Egypt for the closure of Gaza. With the end of authoritarian rule, Egypt has in fact been quick to move to a position quite close to that of Turkey, in the sense of combining a genuine desire for peace with Israel with strong and vocal support for the rights of the Palestinians, including their right to statehood, which is shared by a large majority of European public opinion.

The Palestinian reconciliation is also the result of a strong demand emanating from the Palestinian population. Thousands of young Palestinians have been demonstrating since the middle of March,

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inspired by the wave of democratic uprisings that have been sweeping the Arab world, calling for 'an end to the divide'. As in the Arab countries, the first reaction of the Palestinian authorities was repression, but finally they were forced to accede to the public's demand and move towards reconciliation. Those demonstrating want not only an independent state but a democratic one and they know that without a unified and independent state full democracy is not possible. As in other Arab countries, the positions of the Europeans and Americans were coloured by their fear of political Islam which translated into support for the repressive measures of the Palestinian Authority whose crackdown on Hamas was supported by Israel. As in the other Arab countries, this policy was a failure.

Democratisation in the Arab world and Palestinian reconciliation can create the conditions to isolate not only extremists in Palestine but also the more extremist elements of the Israeli political scene, help to empower the moderates in Israel and thus open the road for peace. It is the ideal moment for Europeans and Americans to change their policy towards Palestine in line with President Obama's historic speech in Cairo when he declared that the Palestinians should fight for their just cause through peaceful means. Elections are surely part of that process.

The immediate US reaction to the agreement between Fatah and Hamas was cautious but not altogether unsupportive. Europeans seem more optimistic about future prospects for peace, as the EU presence at the signing ceremony in Cairo (together with UN and Arab League representatives) and the British Prime Minister's statement appear to indicate. This is in line with the ongoing dialogue with the new Arab interlocutors. The US administration should be persuaded to back Palestinian unity more decisively, and every effort must be made to prevent extremists both in Palestine and Israel from trying to sabotage this new chance for peace.

Everything seems to indicate that Hamas and the radical Fatah splinter groups have understood that the second Intifada was a complete disaster for the Palestinians, radicalising Israeli public opinion and isolating the Palestinians from the democratic world. The EU and the United States should throw their support behind Palestinian unity so as to encourage this positive development which, in spite of official declarations to the contrary, is clearly in the best interests of Israel and its people.