

HAMAS HAS A RECONCILIATION STRATEGY

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“HAARETZ”, SHAUL ARIELI, 10/31/17

It is impossible to predict whether Israel’s destruction of the tunnel near Kissufim, in which eight Islamic Jihad and Hamas militants were killed, will provoke a response from these organizations, but it will definitely be a significant test for Yahya Sinwar, Hamas’s Gaza-based leader. Sinwar can either curb or contain the deadly event in order to maintain the strategy Hamas adopted since he came into power in February.

The uproar surrounding the Netanyahu family and the French Law has created a heavy fog that manages to detach the public discourse in Israel from the events taking place just a few kilometers away, despite the potential for dramatic changes. For the past few months, Sinwar has been navigating a strategic move in the form of a “blessing in disguise,” thus capturing Mahmoud Abbas in the corral of creating a united government. A move that could lead to Hamas’s control of the PLO would return both parties, Israel and the Palestinians, to the starting point of the conflict under the concept of a zero-sum game, and to an even bloodier dispute.

The continued deterioration in Hamas’s economic situation and political position – as a result of Israel’s prolonged blockade; Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi’s policies; Arab sanctions against Qatar; and Abbas’s recent moves – led Sinwar, like his predecessor Ismail Haniyeh before Operation Protective Edge, to offer Abbas management of the Gaza Strip. Publicly, this move is seen as one step backwards, but in Sinwar’s view it advances Hamas more than two steps forward because it frees it from civil responsibilities of Gaza’s residents, allowing it to break through the narrow borders of the Gaza Strip into the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Israel and the countries of the region. Sinwar recognizes what most Israeli cabinet ministers do not recognize: The PLO, despite its weakness, is the best stepping stone to achieve this significant breakthrough.

To this end, Sinwar, along with the new leadership, understand the Palestinian longing for reconciliation for over a decade. Sinwar is willing to go as far as necessary to achieve it, especially to foster united leadership. Hossam Badran, who was appointed the portfolio of reconciliation with Fatah on behalf of Hamas, said in his first interview with the London-based Al-Hayat newspaper that “Hamas’s new leadership, based on released prisoners [in the Shalit deal] who were not involved in the internal Palestinian split, has decided to uproot this division at any cost”. The clarification he published later did not eliminate Fatah’s criticism against the previous leadership, headed by Meshaal, on serving the agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar and Turkey, which did not want Palestinian reconciliation. Even when discussing the military wing, Sinwar has gone a long way and stated that: “We as a nation are still at the stage of national liberation, hence we can not turn in our arms. However, our weapons must be under one national umbrella, incorporating all Palestinians, and this umbrella is the PLO. Al-Qassam Brigades’ weapons are the property of the Palestinian people.” In other words, the PLO is the representative organization of the Palestinians, and as

such it must include all the organizations. When that happens, Hamas will give over its weapons, hoping it will be the leading organization in the PLO.

Hamas's leadership is not moved by Netanyahu and his government throwing dust in their eyes, declaring that they will not negotiate with a Palestinian Authority that includes Hamas. First, they know the most basic thing that was overlooked by the Israeli public – the Israeli government never negotiated with the PA, but only with the PLO, the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. It was the PLO that was upgraded to the status of observer state in the UN General Assembly on November 29, 2012, and it is not within the authority of the PA to negotiate a final-status agreement. Even if the PA would be dismantled tomorrow, "Palestine" will continue to exist as an observer state with the PLO's Chairman as its president.

Second, Hamas is fully aware of the position of Netanyahu's government, which rejects the two-state solution. Ismail Haniyeh's deputy, the Head of the Political Bureau, Saleh al-Aroui, also a released prisoner, clarified the matter last month: "The political path has failed and haven't promoted anything, not leading to the end of the occupation of our people. However, the Fatah movement, our partners in reconciliation and the PLO, believe in this way and think that the split serves Netanyahu's desire to destroy this path. We in Hamas, for our special reasons, want to restore the unity of the Palestinian people and strengthen its position, status and ability to deal with the Zionist enterprise. We share their aspiration to unite the Palestinian arena in order to benefit from political activity for the sake of our people and our cause. We and our partner will march to realize our people's interests, by resistance and political activity." In other words – Hamas will not negotiate with Israel, but it will not interfere when the PLO does. If reconciliation is essential for this objective Hamas will grant it, only to show that the political path has failed regardless of the Palestinian division. Then, Hamas can come clean-handed to the Palestinian public and say "we tried everything" with Israel, calling Fatah to replace its diplomatic tools with Hamas's armed resistance and reverting to the original PLO charter, prior to the Oslo Accords, which sanctified the armed struggle.

The Egyptians, whose interests do not fully coincide with those of Israel, prefer to unite ranks in the Arab world to counter the Turkish and Iranian threats to Arab nationalism. Abbas, who understands the quagmire he was brought into by the Egyptians with the U.S.'s consent, and fully aware of the position of Netanyahu's government, is doing everything possible to get out of it, and out of the reconciliation agreement. After his meeting with King Abdullah of Jordan last week, he said: "In the framework of the Cairo agreement, there should be one authority, one law, and one weapon, so there will be no more militias, which is an unsuccessful model. That's what we consider as reconciliation." Hence, Hamas's entry into the PLO will depend on the inclusion of the military wing into the Palestinian National Security Forces.

Under the current circumstances, the chances of completing the reconciliation process and reaching an agreement are slim. Hamas, which stopped collecting taxes at the border crossings, will be unable to pay salaries to its employees. Even if a temporary financial solution is found, the instability will be too great to persevere. Any escalation between Hamas and Israel will be supported by the entire Palestinian public. In the current atmosphere, a reconciliation failure will point towards Abbas, who will not be able to blame Hamas and will have no choice but to join the next round of violence. Israel may face a unified Palestinian front in which Hamas sets the tone. Reoccupying Gaza, based on the

doctrine of Liberman, the Defense Minister, will only exacerbate the wound. His dream to “crush Hamas” will be revealed as a completely unfeasible because Hamas will enjoy greater control in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and even among some Israeli-Arabs.

A grounded Israeli government would have adopted the concept of Judo – dragging Hamas into the PLO, while simultaneously pushing to renew negotiations for an effective permanent settlement. In that scenario, Abbas would enjoy increasing his prestige in the public eye and ensuring he does not lose his seat to Yahya Sinwar, and Hamas would have to acknowledge the legitimacy of the PLO’s decisions, which correlate to the Quartet’s demands, primarily recognizing Israel. However, such a government would have also reflected that current conduct surrounding the Netanyahu family has more clout on the Israeli government than responding to Hamas’s strategic maneuvers.