

## **Bridging the Divide: Challenges and Prospects in Hamas-Fatah Reconciliation**

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It has been nine months since Hamas launched its deadly attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, prompting the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) to engage in aerial campaigns and ground operations within the Gaza Strip. IDF undertook an operation in central Gaza to rescue four hostages while Gaza authorities reported that 464 Palestinians were killed, and hundreds of others were injured.<sup>1</sup> After a month, Israel conducted a major strike targeting two top Hamas commanders that killed 71 people. As Israel's attacks continue, almost two million Gazans—more than 85 per cent of the population—have left their homes since October 2023.<sup>2</sup> Recent casualty estimates from the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry put the death toll at around 34,000. In the meantime, neither Hamas nor Israel have agreed to the terms laid out by the US President Joe Biden for a ceasefire and hostage release.<sup>3</sup> The conflict has sparked increased regional tensions across the Middle East. Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon have engaged in cross-border skirmishes with the IDF, Yemen's Houthis have shot missiles at Israel and commercial ships in the Red Sea, and other Iran-backed groups have launched dozens of attacks on the US military positions in Iraq and Syria. In addition to Hamas, there is another political party, Fatah, with a divergent vision for the freedom of the Palestinian people. It has greatly influenced the Palestinian government, especially in the West Bank. Different attempts of reconciliation have been made by different stakeholders in history, but the dispute persisted. Because of the ongoing war situation in the region, the results of the recent reconciliation effort are unpredictable.

This article mainly focuses on highlighting different ideologies in Palestine that resulted in the emergence of opposing factions which further led to intra-Palestine rivalry. Moreover, it attempts to analyse the potential future of reconciliation that occurred between different factions of Palestine through the involvement of international actors.

### **Background**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict dates back to the late 19th century and intensified with the establishment of

Israel in 1948, leading to the displacement of Palestinians. Subsequent wars, like the Six-Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973, further shaped territorial control and increased tensions. Peace efforts, such as the Camp David Accords in 1979 between Israel and Egypt, improved regional relations but did not resolve the issue of Palestinian self-determination. To address Palestinian governance, the first intifada in 1987 and the Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995 established the Palestinian Authority (PA) leading to limited self-rule in parts of the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>4</sup> However, the peace process stammered, which resulted in a second intifada in 2000 and subsequent violence. Israel responded by building a barrier wall around the West Bank, which was disapproved of internationally. Factionalism among Palestinians grew stronger with Hamas's 2006 electoral victory and subsequent control of Gaza, causing rifts with Fatah. Efforts for reconciliation culminated in a 2014 unity government between Fatah and Hamas, but tensions persisted. In 2015, violence erupted again, prompting Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to reject the Oslo Accords' territorial divisions.

The conflict's intricate dynamics involve historical claims, competing national aspirations, and geopolitical interests. Efforts by international actors to mediate, including the United Nations and the United States, have yielded temporary ceasefires and peace frameworks, but lasting solutions continue to be missed. Humanitarian concerns persist, with ongoing displacement, economic hardships, and human rights violations affecting both Israelis and Palestinians. Civil society initiatives, grassroots movements, and international advocacy continue to push for dialogue, peace building, and a negotiated settlement that addresses core grievances and aspirations on both sides. As of early 2022, despite periodic escalations and diplomatic efforts, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved, impacting regional stability and global diplomacy. As a result, a variety of wings with distinct perspectives on the region emerge from these dynamics and rival groups.

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### **Fatah: A Recognised Party**

Fatah, officially known as the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, is a major Palestinian nationalist political party and the largest faction of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). Founded in 1959 by Yasser Arafat and other Palestinian nationalists, Fatah played a central role in the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and statehood. Fatah emerged during a period of increased Palestinian nationalist sentiment in response to the establishment of Israel in 1948. It initially aimed to use armed struggle to achieve Palestinian independence and the liberation of its territories. In the 1960s and 1970s, Fatah carried out numerous guerrilla attacks against Israeli military and civilian targets. It rose to prominence within the PLO, eventually becoming the dominant faction.<sup>5</sup> Over time, Fatah evolved its strategy from a primarily armed struggle to include diplomatic and political efforts. It played a key role in negotiations leading to the Oslo Accords in the 1990s, which established the Palestinian Authority (PA) and granted limited self-governance to Palestinians in parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Yasser Arafat, the iconic leader of Fatah and the PLO, led the organisation until he died in 2004. Mahmoud Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, was Arafat's successor as Fatah's and the PA's leader.<sup>6</sup>

Fatah has historically been more moderate than Hamas and other Palestinian factions. It maintains control over the Palestinian Authority, which governs parts of the West Bank. However, internal divisions and competition with other Palestinian factions have hampered its influence. Fatah continues to be a major player in Palestinian politics, advocating for a negotiated two-state solution with Israel based on the 1967 borders. It remains committed to Palestinian national aspirations and seeks international recognition and support for Palestinian statehood. Fatah's history is deeply intertwined with the Palestinian national movement and continues to play a significant role in the endeavours to achieve Palestinian independence. However, the internal rivalry led to the emergence of Hamas.

### **Hamas: An Assertive Force**

Hamas is a Palestinian Islamist militant organisation and a political party that was founded in 1987 during the First Intifada, which was an uprising against occupation by Israel. It emerged as an Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood offshoot. Hamas is well-known for its armed resistance against Israel and its support of Islamic governance in Palestine. It gained popularity through its charitable work and social services in Palestinian

territories, particularly in Gaza. Hamas has been involved in numerous conflicts with Israel, including suicide bombings, rocket attacks, and other forms of violence. It has been designated as a terrorist organisation by several countries and organisations, including the United States, the European Union (EU), Israel, and others.<sup>7</sup>

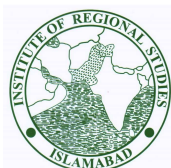
Politically, Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections with a majority but later encountered a political standoff with Fatah, the other major Palestinian political party. This led to Hamas taking control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 after violent clashes with Fatah forces. Since then, Hamas has governed Gaza while the Palestinian Authority, dominated by Fatah, governs parts of the West Bank. Hamas continues to be a significant player in Palestinian politics and the broader Middle East conflict, with ongoing tensions and occasional escalations of violence with Israel shaping its trajectory.<sup>8</sup>

### **Fatah versus Hamas**

The rivalry between Hamas and Fatah has been marked by political tension, armed confrontations, and attempts at reconciliation. Fatah and Hamas hold opposing ideologies that frequently result in periodic violent clashes and political impasses. Fatah historically supported negotiations with Israel for a two-state solution, while Hamas has advocated armed resistance and rejects Israel's right to exist. Following the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, which Hamas won, a power struggle ensued between Hamas, which controls Gaza, and Fatah, which retains authority in parts of the West Bank.<sup>9</sup> Palestinian governance has been fragmented because of this division, which has complicated efforts to achieve national unity. Hamas and Fatah have had sporadic armed conflicts, notably culminating in Hamas taking control of Gaza in 2007 after days of intense fighting. Efforts to reconcile and form a unified Palestinian government have faced numerous obstacles, including differing governance styles, ideological differences, and external pressures.

### **Iran/Hamas Alliance versus Arab/Fatah Nexus**

Iran's support for Hamas is part of its broader strategy to challenge Israeli and Western influence in the Middle East. It provides financial aid, military training, and weapons to Hamas, viewing it as a key ally against Israel.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Fatah's secular nationalist orientation and diplomatic efforts have historically attracted the support of Arab states like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Qatar has provided financial support to Hamas, while Turkey has engaged in diplomatic outreach and hosted Hamas



leaders. Both countries have aimed to bolster their influence in the broader Middle East and leverage their support for Hamas as part of their regional strategies. While the US has historically supported Fatah as a moderate faction willing to negotiate with Israel. This support has varied over time and administration. EU countries generally bolster Fatah and provide financial aid to the Palestinian Authority for governance and development projects.

The rivalry between Hamas and Fatah reflects mainly a geopolitical dynamic in the Middle East, with religious, nationalist, and international factors shaping their positions and interactions. While efforts for reconciliation have occasionally emerged, deep-seated divisions and external influences continue to complicate prospects for Palestinian unity and a negotiated resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### **Hamas as Iran's Proxy Partner**

Iran views the Palestinian cause through the lens of Islamic solidarity and support for fellow Muslims. Palestine, particularly Jerusalem (Al-Quds), holds significant religious and historical importance in Islam, which resonates deeply with Iran's religious identity and ideology. Secondly, Iran has maintained a staunch anti-Israel stance since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. This ideological opposition to Israel is rooted in the perception of Israel as an occupying power that has displaced Palestinians and controls territories considered sacred by Muslims. Supporting Palestine, particularly groups like Hamas that resist Israeli occupation, aligns with Iran's broader geopolitical strategy of countering Israeli influence in the region.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, by supporting Palestinian factions such as Hamas, Iran seeks to expand its influence in the Middle East and challenge the dominance of Israel and its allies. This support allows Iran to maintain a foothold in Palestinian territories, particularly Gaza, and gain leverage in regional politics, especially in its competition with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. In addition, support for Palestine also serves domestic political purposes within Iran. It rallies public support and reinforces the legitimacy of the Iranian government among its population, particularly among conservatives and religious hardliners who prioritize resistance against Israel and support for Palestinian rights. Lastly, Iran's support for Palestinian groups like Hamas also fits into its strategy of supporting proxy forces and non-state actors that can challenge Israel and its allies indirectly. This approach allows Iran to exert influence and project power while avoiding confrontation with stronger regional powers. Hence, Iran's support for Palestine is

driven by a combination of ideological, religious, strategic, and geopolitical factors. It reflects Iran's broader regional ambitions and its opposition to Israel and Western influence in the Middle East, while also serving domestic political purposes. Besides the long history of conflict, several attempts at reconciliation have been observed by different actors.<sup>12</sup>

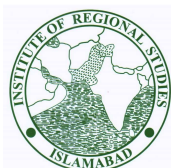
### **Reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah**

It is worth noting that Qatar, a key mediator between Israel and Hamas, had also attempted to mediate between Fatah and Hamas in October 2006. In 2012, Qatar brokered the Fatah-Hamas Doha Agreement, but disputes between the two parties persisted. Nonetheless, a major development occurred after the signing of a historic declaration for reconciliation by an international player, China.

Following the signing of what has been referred to as the 'Beijing Declaration', Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, "Reconciliation is an internal matter for the Palestinian factions, but at the same time, it cannot be achieved without the support of the international community."<sup>13</sup>

The agreement, specifically the formation of a national consensus government that would work on the unity of the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza, would also pave the way for general elections there. Palestinian factions, including rivals Fatah and Hamas, have signed the 'unity declaration' in Beijing, agreeing to resolve their divisions and jointly govern Gaza under an 'interim national reconciliation government' following the end of the Israeli war. The signing of the China-brokered declaration took place under the presence of China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi during the closing ceremony of the reconciliation dialogue in the Chinese capital held between 21-23 July 2024. Envoys from Qatar, Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Russia, and Türkiye attended the closing ceremony on Tuesday, China's foreign ministry confirmed.<sup>14</sup> "These are historic moments, and we ask God to help us implement what we signed, and not for it to be a model of what we signed in the past. We are in a historical moment recorded by the struggle of our people, whom we salute," Abu Marzouk said during the signing.

The ongoing conflict has been significantly impacted by the division between Hamas and Fatah, which has hindered Palestinian unity and weakened their position in the peace talks, but reconciliation could lead to a unified Palestinian front. However, during times of active fighting any reconciliation will face significant obstacles.



## Conclusion

Following the attack by Hamas on Israel on 7 October 2023, significant shifts have occurred within Palestinian politics. In the wake of such events, Hamas, which revived the Palestinian cause has often been seen as gaining influence, especially when it positions itself as the main resistance force against Israel. This can increase its support base among Palestinians who view its action as a form of resistance. On the other hand, Fatah, also a dominant party in the Palestinian Authority (PA), is generally seen as more moderate than Hamas and may struggle to maintain its influence if it is perceived as ineffective in the current volatile climate. Hamas is considered a proxy partner of Iran because of its external

support so this connection raises the possibility that Hamas could strengthen its influence in the West Bank, potentially at the expense of Fatah's political power. While the reconciliation efforts between Hamas and Fatah have seen varying degrees of success and failure, both parties have made several attempts to bridge their differences and achieve unity. However, a successful reconciliation between the two parties could result in a more unified Palestinian leadership. It might present a more cohesive front in peace talks and other diplomatic efforts. Such unity would likely enhance their political leverage in negotiations with Israel and other international actors, this could significantly impact the effectiveness of Palestinian representation on the global stage and in peace processes.

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