

Conference Paper

## **Diversity in Unity? Fragmentation of the Palestinian People and the Fight for Unity**

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Diversity, Unity, and Fragmentation are three terms that have been dominating the Palestinian political discourse since the emergence of the Palestinian National Movement in the twentieth century. The internal Palestinian division since June 2007 has given more intensity to the discussion about Diversity, Unity, and Fragmentation.

Diversity is a term that describes different socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicity, religions, cultural values, political/ideological affiliation, etc. in a given society. It is generally believed that diversity is not only valuable but also desirable in order to promote better communication within the society, leading to more knowledge, understanding, and the ability of peaceful coexistence between different social and political actors and between the citizens in one society. However diversity in general and diverse political programs and powers in particular can lead to fragmentation if they can't coexist peacefully with each other, within a unifying system of values, laws, rules, and regulations. Such a unifying system exists in the form of a Constitutions, National Laws, and International Conventions and Laws. The lack of such a system turns diversity into a ticking bomb.

Diversity within the Palestinian context refers to the term that describes the differences in the political programs of different political forces and the different ways and / or means to achieve these programs. The current political fragmentation within the Palestinian National Movement is an illustration of how political diversity can turn into a destructive power with far reaching negative implications.

The story of the Palestinians search for statehood, which started after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, has always been dominated by diverse social and political actors. This diversity intensified after 1948 as a result of the physical fragmentation of the Palestinian people

into four distinct groups; Palestinians who remained in what became Israel, the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Kingdom of Jordan, the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, and the Palestinians in the Diaspora. While the Palestinians managed to cope with the new situation (1948-1965), they lacked the political structures that were capable of challenging the various attempts by different Arab governments to dominate them.

The establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1964 by the Arab League and the subsequent accession of the armed resistance groups to it and the ascendancy of Yasser Arafat as the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the PLO in 1969 marked a turning point in the history of the Palestinian National Liberation Movement. The new Palestinian leadership represented a generational shift from the leadership of the elitist notables during the British Mandate period to a leadership with urban Middle Class and refugee camps background articulating mass politics with strong militant rhetoric and action. Within less than one decade after its establishment the PLO gained the recognition as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people by the Palestinians themselves and by the Arab world and the International community.

No Palestinian political movement has ever enjoyed such recognition. For the first time after 1948 the Palestinians were considered a people with national rights and a major factor in the Middle East. The PLO deserves much of the credit for bringing the Palestinian cause back to the political centre stage after 1948. The political significance of the PLO goes beyond being an organizational structure to becoming the political identity of the Palestinian people regardless of their place of residence. The PLO succeeded in ending the political fragmentation of the Palestinian National Movement while maintaining its diversity.

This new equation "Diversity in Unity" survived many critical political junctures. The legitimacy of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people was never seriously questioned despite deep political differences between its different factions throughout the years. Even Hamas until recently has never challenged the legitimacy of the PLO. The participation of Hamas in the PLC elections in 2006 underlines its acceptance of the PLO and the structures created by it.

The signing of the Oslo Agreements in 1993 and the subsequent establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in 1994 created a new reality on the ground. The centre of gravity

for the Palestinian National Movement shifted from exile to the Occupied Territories, and new organizational and administrative structures and institutions were created. The first Palestinian presidential and parliamentary elections in early 1996 signalled a clear attempt by the Palestinian leadership to create Para-state structures under the umbrella of the Oslo Agreements. It is worth mentioning that the Agreements themselves did not foresee the creation of a Parliament. The “Peace Process” was considered by the Palestinian Leadership as irreversible and a first step towards statehood, a phase that required institutional transformation to Para – state structures.

The lack of a clear vision and strategy for state building and the focus primarily on how to proceed with political negotiations with Israel while neglecting the necessity of strong state structures as a national goal, led not only in failure in State building efforts but also to a gradual diminishing of the PLO’s role and structures. The PLO was replaced by the so called “The Palestinian Leadership” a very vague structure that included parts of the Executive Committee of the PLO, some senior members of the PNA, some independent personalities, and anyone who just happened to be present at the time of the meeting of the “Leadership”. What remained from the PLO, was its legal status as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians and in that capacity the PLO signed all political, economic, and aid agreements with external parties on behalf of the PNA.

The failure of the Camp David talks in summer 2000 followed by the eruption of the second Intifada and later its militarization and the attacks against Israeli civilians inside Israel proper, provided Israel with the pretext to not only start a systematic process of targeting the physical civilian and security infrastructure of the PNA but also to wage a public relations campaign worldwide to delegitimize the Palestinian Leadership. The result was an internationally weakened PLO and a destroyed PNA.

The collapse of the central authority including the judicial system and the law enforcement authorities combined with the weakening role of the PLO turned once again the diversity into fragmentation that reached its climax in June 2007 through the violent takeover of the Gaza Strip by the Hamas forces. It is worth noting that the fragmentation was not only along political lines, but also along social lines. The political fragmentation was not limited to the two main rivals; Fatah and Hamas; it was horizontal and vertical through and across the whole political map in the occupied territories. The lack of central authority paved also the way for the revival of

tribalism and the emergence of war lords who took the law in their own hands. A process of social disintegration was gradually taking shape.

The current situation provokes the following question: to what extent can the current internal division be attributed to the existence of two different and conflicting political programs? In answering this question, I begin with reminding the readers that during the National Unity talks in Mecca in 2007, the parties managed in a fairly short time to reach an agreement on a joint political program. A source who was engaged in the talks then told me, that agreeing on the political program of the National Unity government was the easiest part of the Mecca agreement. What brought the National Unity government to its tragic end were not the differences about the political program but rather the disagreement on power sharing in addition to external factors.

From an objective perspective, we have never been so close to an agreement for reconciliation like we are today. Hamas has on different occasions and through senior members of its leadership declared its acceptance of an independent Palestinian state on the borders of 1967. What remained of Hamas “resistance program” are the rhetoric and the slogans. The deposed government in Gaza does not tolerate any challenge to its authority as the only legitimate authority and by this it is claiming monopoly of power and is subscribing to the concept of “one authority and one gun”. The PNA government distinguishes itself through two aspects; the adoption of state building as a national objective, and the adoption of popular mass resistance. Despite the minor differences between the two sides regarding the political program and the centrality of one authority, the reconciliation seems to be remote.

In view of the above, the reasons for the internal division seem to be rooted in something that goes beyond and deeper than differences in the political programs of the rival parties. I would strongly argue that it is related to the “Weltanschauung” of Hamas. This German term that has its roots in the German philosophical tradition can be translated into English in “Worldview” and it refers to the framework of ideas and beliefs through which an individual or a group interprets the world and interacts with it. Hamas, as an integral part of the International Moslem Brotherhood Movement, has Islam as its “Worldview”, and as such the long term objective of Hamas is to construct an Islamic society with Islamic rule. National liberation within this context is in itself not an End. At the same time, and in consequence of this fundamental orientation, Hamas does not consider land as the essence of the conflict with Israel and therefore is ready

to accept a Palestinian state within provisional borders and a long term “Hudna” or ceasefire with Israel. Hudna can be reconciled with Hamas’s “worldview” of Islam which forbids entering into agreements with Infidels.

The bloody events of June 2007 and the seizure of power by Hamas in the Gaza Strip were considered by Hamas an achievement. From their perspective, controlling the authority in Gaza offers an opportunity to provide a model of Islamic rule ala Moslem Brotherhood. The fact that Hamas today is refusing to sign the Egyptian proposal for reconciliation and rejecting the holding of parliamentary, presidential, and municipal elections, and finally their questioning of the legitimacy of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people is a testimony to their clear Islamic non-national agenda. Furthermore, this is a testimony of the reluctance of Hamas to accept democratic system of governance.

In conclusion; achieving unity requires a consensus that is build on a solid basis and a framework of principles that defines the system of governance within the PNA and the future Palestinian state. In my opinion such a system exists in two basic documents; namely; the Palestinian Declaration of Independence and the Basic Law of the PNA. All parties shall declare their unequivocal commitment to the principles and values stipulated in these two documents.

Allow me to quote from the two documents:

### **The Palestinian Declaration of Independence**

“In it (*the Palestinian state*) will be safeguarded their (*the Palestinian People*) political and religious convictions and their human dignity by means of a parliamentary democratic system of governance, itself based on freedom of expression and the freedom to form parties.

The rights of minorities will dully be respected by the majority, as minorities must abide by the decisions of the majority. Governance will be based on principles of social justice, equality and non-discrimination in public rights of men and women, on grounds of race, colour, or sex, and the aegis of a constitution which ensures the rule of law and an independent judiciary. Thus shall these principles allow no departure from Palestine’s age-old spiritual and civilizational heritage of tolerance and religious coexistence”

### **The Palestinian Basic Law**

**Article2:** The people are the source of power...

**Article 4:** The principles of Islamic Shari’a shall be a principle source of legislations

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**Article 5:** The governing system in Palestine shall be a democratic parliamentary system, based upon political pluralism.

Only by respecting and acting upon these principles will unity be achieved and sustained and diversity will be respected. Political unity does not and should not replace political diversity. Diversity is at the core of any democratic system of governance, because it widens the choices of the people and enhances their participation in the political process.

The Palestinian National Movement is in a unique situation today. It is burdened with dual national objectives; ending occupation and achieving independence, and at the same time building the institutional infrastructure for a future state. Although the two objectives are strongly intertwined and influence each other, however working towards achieving them requires different approaches and institutional setups. Given the legal status of the PLO and its Arab and International recognition, and its standing among the Palestinians inside Palestine and in the Diaspora, it remains the only possible platform for uniting and rallying all Palestinian factions around the national agenda of ending occupation and achieving independence.

This however requires reforming its structures in a democratic way that would allow the accession of the Islamic political forces and representing them in the PLO's different structures. The Palestinian National Authority should be entrusted primarily with the task of state building. Restoring unity to the PNA should go through the people and not above them. People are the source of power and legitimacy. Any power sharing arrangements should be of an interim nature.