

## Palestinian Reconciliation

November 2017 Bessan Shehada, project coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) in Gaza interviewed Dr. Ibrahim Abrach, academic and former Minister of Culture.



### What are the exact terms of the recent reconciliation agreement?

The reconciliation agreement aims at creating a mechanism to reactivate reconciliation through a combination of the Cairo agreement from 2011 and President Abbas' initiative to lift the punitive measures he imposed on Gaza this year. The agreement states that to begin with the administrative committee, which the Hamas formed in 2017 to govern the Gaza Strip, must be dissolved. In addition, the punishments imposed on the Gaza Strip, including the issue of Hamas employees, must be reviewed and reversed. It also states that the issue of Hamas employees must be considered as laid out in the Cairo agreement,

which specifies that they should be integrated with the Palestinian Authority employees, based upon skills, needs and the seeking of other opportunities for those who cannot be integrated. Media talk of incitement must also end and be replaced with a rhetoric of unity. Moreover, the agreement states that Rafah border must be opened after its handover to Presidential Guards. It has also been agreed that a meeting with representatives of all factions will be held to evaluate what must be done and to discuss the formulation of a National Unity Government, in preparing for legislative elections. The establishment of a free trade area was also discussed after the formulation of the national unity government.

## Why has the reconciliation begun now?

The reconciliation dialogue has been suspended for more than a year. However, after the Riyadh Summit in May 2017 paired with Iran's threats, general Arab-Israeli relations and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict - everyone has realized that it's simply not possible to carry out any political settlement unless there is Palestinian involvement, and the guarantee of a stable situation in the Gaza strip which is under Hamas' control.

On the other hand, an attempt has already been made to diffuse the situation in the Gaza Strip through dialogue between Hamas and Mohammad Dahlan under Egyptian auspices, which ignored the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. This happened at the beginning of June this year, when a delegation from Hamas headed by Al-Senwar (the Hamas Gaza Chief) visited Cairo. Nevertheless, Washington realized that settling the conflict with the Palestinians and Israel could not be done unless the legal and the representatives of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and President Abbas are involved.

## What role does Egypt play in this agreement?

Due to the deadlock in relations between the PA and Washington - and because the talks involve Arab normalization with Israel, and as Egypt and Saudi Arabia are two of the strongest Arab powers, Washington counts on Egypt to make the Century Agreement successful - Saudi Arabia and Egypt have been commissioned to adapt the Palestinians settlement. The arrangement involves integrating Hamas and ensuring that the situation in the Gaza Strip does not collapse. It also involves limiting Hamas from Iran. Further, Egypt has an interest in its national security, and clearly wants to cut off relations with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood groups that are hostile to the Egyptian policy. Thus, Hamas could potentially help protect the Egyptian borders with the Gaza Strip.

## What is the role of Dahlan in this agreement?

Dahlan has no role in the final agreement. We can say that this current agreement counters the Hamas-Dahlan dialogues from a few months ago, and works against the role Dahlan was about to be take in the Gaza Strip. However, the failure of the current reconciliation would provide Dahlan with an opportunity to go back to a dialogue with Hamas concerning the governing of the Gaza Strip.

## What are the possibilities for a success reconciliation process?

The situation is obviously complex, and much of the success of this reconciliation seriously depends on Trump's initiative and the terms of the final political settlement in general. However, though there are some points that the Palestinians can resolve on their own, such as the salaries issue, improvement in the electricity situation, a joint national unity view, and PLO reformulation. However, there are more issues at stake than the Palestinians can accomplish alone. For instance, a Palestinian reconciliation could neither lift the siege on the Gaza Strip nor unite Gaza and the West Bank under one authority and one government, since Israel effectively exerts sovereignty over the Palestinian Authority.

## What steps have been made by now, and what are the challenges they face?

A significant beginning has been achieved, but from hereon, things get more difficult. At the moment only the Hamas administrative committee in Gaza has been dissolved, and the consensus government has officially taken over the land borders of the Gaza strip.

Regarding the challenges faced, there are plenty and highly complicated - security structures, holding of weapons, the judiciary and the

employees' issue, for instance.

We believe that Israel is the biggest obstacle to achieving a landmark unity government, and it can thwart the reconciliation at any time; for example, it has announced that it will never deal with any Palestinian government in which Hamas is involved. This position has been also taken by Washington.

### **How do you evaluate the steps taken by both Fatah and Hamas?**

So far movements made are slow and all parties are cautious. Both parties continue to be skeptical, especially the Palestinian Presidency. The two factions-Fatah and Hamas, seemed to be receptive to Egypt. Neither can realistically reject the Egyptian invitation, especially after Egypt informed them that any party that rejects the invitation would be bypassed and be replaced.

Security control is still controlled by the Hamas, how will the Palestinian Authority be able to take over the strip?

This is among the most complex issues at stake, but it can be solved if the elected government has control over civilian security services such as police and national security. The issue of resistance can be postponed until elections are held. There are shared understandings regarding the possibilities for the forming of an Arab Palestinian committee chaired by Egypt to discuss the issue of armed resistance. This forum can settle the issue in case Hamas participates in the next major political settlement.

### **Will elections be held in the near future?**

The Cairo agreement stated that an election will be held. Regarding the last agreement, they estimated that elections will be held four months after the Palestinian Authority government's reception of tasks, but when will the government receive the tasks? Will Israel accept general elections in the Gaza Strip and West Bank as well as the East Jerusalem? What do Gazans think of the agreement?

All this being said, there is more optimism now than in previous times when the reconciliation agreements were announced. Gazans demand their daily needs be met immediately, including improving the electricity situation, opening the Rafah border, reversing the punitive measures imposed on Gaza by the Palestinian Authority, and improving the economic situation. However, they do not fully trust the factions, especially the Fatah and Hamas. They are also very aware of possible changes in the reconciliation process and the American role in it.

Everyone talks about another war coming, especially after the tunnels were attacked recently. What is the possibility for the start of a new war?

I reject the possibility of a war being waged on the Gaza Strip any time soon. The 2014 war was devastating and painful to the Gaza Strip and to the resistance. We do not think that the resistance factions want a new war. Israel might intend to spark some tension in the Gaza Strip, in an attempt to affect the reconciliation process. This was clearly noticed when the tunnel was bombed in the past weeks. Moreover, the regional, Arab and international situations do not help Hamas and Jihad factions get into new military confrontations. Maybe some people from Hamas, whom the reconciliation negatively affects, are thinking of sparking a military confrontation to thwart the reconciliation. However though, Yahya Al-Senwar and the political administration do not want this!

## What is your vision or expectation for the next year on the political level?

Regarding the next year, I expect that the procedures of reconciliation process will slowly continue. It also may stumble and stop for few months; the matter is connected with Trump's initiative. It likely will not be as the Palestinians wish, and it may spark tension in the internal Palestinian situation and potentially with the authority's relations with some Arabic countries.

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) is one of the major institutions of political education in the Federal Republic of Germany. RLS serves as a forum for debate and critical thinking about political alternatives, as well as a research center for progressive social development. It is closely affiliated to the German Left Party (DIE LINKE). The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine has supported partners in Palestine since 2000, and established the Regional

Office in Ramallah in 2008. Today, the office is in charge of project cooperation with partners in the West Bank, in East Jerusalem, and in the Gaza Strip as well as in Jordan.

Let's talk about Gaza is a collection of interviews from people of Gaza about their personal daily life experience. It describes the sociopolitical and economic situation of the people in Gaza. Views and opinions expressed in the interviews are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily represent the views of interviewer /organization.

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