

Hamas-Fatah reconciliation process shows growing Egyptian influence in region

Amr Emam

Cairo

Signs of reconciliation between rival Palestinian factions Hamas and Fatah would signal long-awaited Palestinian unity, an end to Hamas's isolation and improved humanitarian conditions in Gaza along with re-establishing Egypt as a force on the regional scene, experts said.

"This would prove that Cairo still has leverage over the Palestinian file, something that was strongly contested by a number of regional powers," said Egyptian MP Samir Ghattas. "Over the past few years, regional powers like

Turkey, Qatar and Iran have tried to replace Cairo as the main player in the Palestinian file, using the unrest in [Egypt] and weakening regional influence."

Hamas announced it would dissolve the administration that runs Gaza – a major step towards handing control of the Gaza Strip to a Palestinian unity government – after Egyptian officials mediated talks between Hamas and Fatah representatives in Cairo.

The deal would allow for Palestinian Authority control over the Rafah Crossing between Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, resolve the problem of overdue salaries for thousands of administrative workers in Gaza and restore electricity supplies to Gaza. It would, necessarily, pave the way for legislative and presidential elections in the Palestinian territories.

Reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah is an important step for wider Palestinian unity, leading to the formation of a government that could reactivate a stalled Palestinian-Israeli peace process. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi met separately with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, during which he stressed the importance of resuming Palestinian-Israeli peace talks.

However, despite Hamas's announcement and Abbas's welcome of the move, success hinges on complex issues related to power-sharing. Similar previous reconciliation efforts, most recently in 2014, failed after disagreements over the details.



Traditional leverage. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (R) meeting with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas in Cairo, last April. (AFP)

“Cooperation between Hamas and Iran brings Iranian influence to Egypt's doorstep, which is very dangerous.”



Tarek Fahmi, a political science professor at Cairo University

For Egypt, the deal confirms that Cairo is still a regional power, even as the country faces economic problems. "I commend the Egyptian authorities for their tireless efforts in creating this positive momentum," said UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov.

"This is why I say the possible deal is yet new proof that Egypt is still strong, despite its internal problems," Ghattas said. "It also amounts to a major blow to claims by other regional powers that they can influence the course of events in the Palestinian territories."

Cairo expressed concerns about perceived attempts by Tehran to draw Hamas into its orbit. In late August, Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar alluded to strengthening ties between his movement and Iran, describing these ties as "excel-

lent" and "strategic."

Cairo's role in sponsoring the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation would ensure that Tehran is unable to influence the Palestinian file. This is a political and national security victory for Egypt, experts said.

"Cooperation between Hamas and Iran brings Iranian influence to Egypt's doorstep, which is very dangerous," said Tarek Fahmi, a political science professor at Cairo University. "This is why containing Hamas and preventing it from cooperating with rival powers like Iran is very important for Egypt's national security."

Representatives from Hamas and Fatah are to meet directly in Cairo to discuss details of the reconciliation deal. This would ensure continuing security cooperation from Hamas in securing the border between the Sinai Peninsula

and Gaza at a time when Islamic State (ISIS) fighters operate in the area.

Cairo had accused Hamas – an ideological offshoot of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood – of abetting ISIS fighters in Sinai. However, renewed security cooperation between Cairo and Hamas tightened security on the border, assisting Egypt in its fight against ISIS in Sinai.

"This cooperation will cut off all types of support for the ISIS militants, which will further weaken them," said Saad al-Zunt, head of the Political and Strategic Studies Centre, an Egyptian think-tank. "This will help the Egyptian Army speed up the eradication of this group."

Amr Emam is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.

Amr Moussa's memoirs make waves across the Middle East

Amr Emam

Cairo

The memoirs of veteran Egyptian statesman Amr Moussa are making waves across the Middle East.

It took the former Arab League secretary-general and long-time Egyptian foreign minister and his biographer Khaled Abu Bakr two years to write the first volume of "Ketabiyah" ("My Testimony"). The memoirs present Moussa's views of his years of serving Egypt.

● **Moussa has been a fixture of Egyptian and Arab diplomacy for five decades, having close personal relationships with many Arab leaders.**

However, the book has been met with fervent anger from sections of Egyptian society, particularly the family of former President Gamal Abdel Nasser and his supporters.

Nasser's youngest son, Abdel Hakim Nasser, said he would not "stoop to Amr Moussa's level" by replying to his claims in the book, including that Nasser, a diabetic,

used to import expensive special food from Switzerland in the early 1960s. Moussa claimed that he had direct knowledge of this because of his time as a junior employee at the Egyptian Embassy in Bern. In a country then suffering extreme poverty and the threat of war, Moussa's claim could tarnish Nasser's man-of-the-people image.

Gamal Fahmi, a left-wing writer, said Moussa's "views of Nasser weaken the credibility of his book. "Everybody knows that Nasser was a great leader, whose life was not ostentatious in any manner," Fahmi said.

In the memoirs, Moussa described two brief encounters with Nasser and dwells on his style of rule, placing the perceived failings of the late revolutionary leader under the spotlight.

Moussa was working in the Foreign Ministry in Cairo during the Six-Day War in 1967 when the Egyptian and Syrian armies suffered a humiliating defeat at Israel's hands and that resulted in the occupation of the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula and the Syrian Golan Heights.

Moussa, in the book, attributed Egypt's defeat to the army's lack of preparedness, Nasser's rashness and miscalculations. He also found fault with the late leader's one-man style of rule.



"I am ready to prove everything I write in this first volume of the memoirs," Moussa told The Arab Weekly. "I did not mean to defame Nasser in any manner but I am telling the truth."

Moussa has been a fixture of Egyptian and Arab diplomacy for five decades, having close personal relationships with many Arab leaders. He has had a front-row seat to the changes that continue in the Arab region.

The first volume of Moussa's memoirs covers the period from his birth in 1936 to the day he left his position as Egypt's foreign minister in 2001 after ten years as Egypt's top diplomat. As he ascended the diplomatic ladder, starting in 1957 after his graduation from law school to his becoming foreign minister in 1991, Moussa had a clear view of the events, policies and people that have made Egypt and the Arab region what they are today.

He witnessed the tough times Egypt experienced following the 1967 defeat and the subsequent victory in the October 1973 war with Israel. Moussa was close to the late President Anwar Sadat, played a small role in the peace negotiations with Israel and was at the heart of the diplomatic furor that followed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

Moussa was also at the centre of

Arab diplomacy at a time of great rivalry with regional powers Iraq and Turkey.

Abu Bakr, a senior editor at the private Egyptian daily al-Shorouk, described writing Moussa's memoirs as "extremely tough."

● **Moussa described the memoirs as the "record" of his life as a politician and a diplomat.**

"This is a very senior diplomat who will leave nothing to the world but the record of the roles he played in the service of his country and the Arab nation," Abu Bakr said. "This is why documenting everything he related and writing it in a correct manner was a matter of utmost importance."

Moussa said he would not have written his memoirs but feared that he could repeat the plight of Osama al-Baz, a close confidant of former President Hosni Mubarak and Sadat, who died in 2013 without producing his memoirs.

Moussa described the memoirs as the "record" of his life as a politician and a diplomat.

"They are the harvest of all the years of my work, my whole life," he said.