

Iran pushing for Hamas-Hezbollah reconciliation

The Arab Weekly staff

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While Egypt mediated a reconciliation deal between Palestinian rivals Hamas and Fatah, Iran appeared to be pushing for a thaw of ties between Hamas and the Lebanese movement Hezbollah and both were unwelcome developments for Israel.

Hamas has moved to strengthen ties with Hezbollah after the two parties, which have been engaged in hostilities against Israel, took opposing sides in the Syrian war.

Prior to the popular uprising against Syrian President Bashar Assad in 2011, Hamas was an ally of the Damascus regime, Hezbollah and regional heavyweight Iran, in what was branded as “the axis of resistance” against Israel.

While initially refraining from criticising Assad, Hamas later announced that it supported the aspirations of the Syrian people in its uprising against the regime. Its position on Syria led to the souring of relations with Iran, which reduced funding of the Palestinian movement.

Iranian and pro-Hezbollah media outlets accused Hamas of actively supporting Syrian rebels, a charge the Palestinian group denied. As the war in Syria appears to be dying down, ties between Hamas and Hezbollah seem to be thawing, likely with encouragement from Iran.

“The alliance between Hamas and Hezbollah is a direct result of the renewed relations between Iran and Hamas,” wrote Khaled Abu Toameh in the website of the Gatestone Institute.

Saleh al-Arouri, Hamas’s deputy political chief, had a rare public meeting with Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut on October 31. The meeting occurred soon after Arouri visited Iran.

Pro-Hezbollah al-Manar TV said Arouri and Nasrallah discussed “the Zionist aggression against Gaza and its ramifications” following an Israeli attack on a tunnel in the Gaza Strip that killed eight members of the Palestinian group Islamic Jihad.

Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh took part in a Hezbollah-sponsored conference on the Balfour Declaration on November 1 in Beirut, which kicked off with a message from Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Other senior partici-



Radical attraction. Hamas’s Deputy Political Chief Saleh al-Arouri (L) meets with Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut, on October 31. (Social media)

pants included Hezbollah’s deputy chief Sheikh Naim Qassem.

Observers said both sides were likely to benefit from rapprochement.

“It is no secret that Hamas, despite having different positions regarding the Syrian crisis, needs Hezbollah when it comes to funding, training, securing supply lines for weapons and providing residence for Hamas cadres in Lebanon,” Adnan Abu Amer, wrote on the website Al-Monitor.

“For its part, Hezbollah needs a Palestinian movement, such as Hamas, to restore its popularity among Arab public opinion, which it lost after being involved in the wars in Syria, Iraq and Yemen against Sunni Muslims. Hamas... may help dispel Hezbollah’s sectarian image,” Amer added.

The meetings between Hamas leaders and Hezbollah officials

have raised alarms in Israel.

In September, the head of Israeli intelligence service Shin Bet, Nadav Argaman, warned that Hamas and Hezbollah were gearing up for a new conflict against Israel. Argaman’s warning echoed a statement by Israeli Defence Minister Avig-

dor Liberman in August in which he accused Arouri of attempting “to boost the relationship between Hamas and Hezbollah” with the help of Iran to plan attacks against Israel.

Israel demanded Hamas cut relations with Iran but the Palestinian movement responded by saying that the visit by its delegation to Tehran is “a rejection of the Zionist entity’s conditions to cut ties with (Iran).”

The Hamas-Hezbollah thaw is likely to also ire Egypt and Saudi Arabia, whose relations with Iran and the Lebanese movement had hit an all-time low.

“The Egyptians are trying to rein in Hamas from its past and current ties with Iran, which supports Hezbollah,” wrote Jack Houry in Haaretz.

Egypt has not publicly criticised Hamas for strengthening ties with

Hezbollah and Iran, possibly because the Palestinian leaders have made a number of gestures to win Cairo’s favour.

“To ensure Hamas’s survival, [Hamas leaders] are even willing to sever ties with their mother ship, the Muslim Brotherhood, to appease Egypt, its saviour and Brotherhood nemesis,” wrote Shlomi Eldar in Al-Monitor.

Despite rising tensions between Saudi Arabia, which is an ally of Egypt, and Hezbollah, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said Cairo was not mulling measures against the Lebanese movement.

“The subject is not about taking on or not taking on [Hezbollah]; the subject is about the status of the fragile stability in the region in light of the unrest facing the region,” Sisi told CNBC. “The region cannot support more turmoil,” he added.

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Palestinians should put more focus on their case internationally



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The PLO should join more international bodies and conventions and use these to pressure Israel back to the negotiating table.

If it is to make progress towards realising its people’s legitimate right to self-determination in their homeland, the Palestinian leadership needs to take stock and weigh its options.

The Palestinians should be under no illusion that the so-called deal of the century US President Donald Trump’s advisers are working on will be made in Tel Aviv, not Washington or Ramallah. It will be a deal of the century designed to strengthen Israel’s hold on the land from the river to the sea. It will not be based on respect or adherence to international law and will not deliver an independent Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, the minimum the Palestinians would accept as a resolution to the conflict.

It will certainly not include a return of Palestinian refugees to their homes. This will make a deal impossible to accept. The repercussions would be disastrous for the Palestinians as they will once again be blamed for the failure. It would be disastrous for the

Palestinian leadership to wait for the above scenario to materialise. It must set its own agenda and make rapid progress on it.

The Palestinians have no option but to escalate their efforts to internationalise their case and to pursue measures that would bring some form of accountability on Israel through peaceful means. This they can do with a more united leadership as the reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas evolves. Yes, the road ahead is rocky but promising.

The United States has effectively closed the door on accountability through the UN Security Council, where, if needed, it will always wield the veto. In the UN General Assembly, where the United States does not enjoy the right to veto resolutions, the Palestinians can initiate them and win but they will remain unenforceable. The Palestinians are enjoying greater success in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), where the United States does not hold a veto. Significantly, the council is about to publish a database containing the names of companies complicit in Israel’s occupation. This has

raised strong condemnation from both Israel and the United States.

The United States may decide to leave the UNHRC as an expression of anger at what it sees as obsessive criticism of Israel as it has done with UNESCO. This may dissuade other international bodies and conventions from accepting the state of Palestine as a member, knowing that it will use this primarily to bring accountability on Israel for violations that come under the scope of the organisation in question. The Palestinian Liberation Organisation’s response should be to join more international bodies and conventions and use these to pressure Israel back to the negotiating table or face greater accountability.

For example, it should work for Israel’s suspension from football’s world governing body, FIFA, for operating football teams in the illegal settlements.

The Palestinian Liberation Organisation should vigorously pursue Israel through the International Criminal Court (ICC), which it joined in 2014. A focus on the illegal settlements is the clear-

est case to bring. Other countries regard the settlements as illegal as does international law. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu recently promised never to dismantle a settlement and to expand the illegal enterprise.

While the Palestinians and the ICC would come under enormous pressure not to act, surely it is an action the Palestinians must pursue with vigour.

The Palestinians should be under no illusion that the consequences of escalating this battle would be costly for them. They will need strong support from Arab allies who should insist on Israel agreeing fully to the 2002 Arab peace initiative as a start. The initiative spells out clearly what Israel needs to do for it to reap the huge benefits normalisation of relations with the Arab and Muslim world would bring.

The Palestinians should insist that a return to talks should be based on international law and well-known UN resolutions on the conflict. The Palestinians have options. More of the same is not one of them.