



Araştırma Makalesi • Research Article

Hamis-PLO/Fatah Reconciliation and Rapprochement within the Unfolding Regional Order in the Middle East since 2010: Neorealist and Neoclassical Realist Perspectives

2010 Sonrasında Orta Doğu'da Değişen Bölgesel Düzendeki Hamis-FKÖ/Fetih Uzlaşısı ve Yakınlaşması: Neo-Realist ve Neo-Klasik Realist Bir Değerlendirme

Philipp O. Amour ^{a,*}

^a Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Sakarya Üniversitesi, Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi, Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü, 54187, Sakarya/Türkiye.
ORCID: 0000-0001-6287-4625

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ÖZ

Bu makale iki ana soruya değinmektedir. Birincisi, 2010 yılından itibaren bölgesel dinamikler ve iç tercihler, Filistin uzlaşısını ve yakınlaşmasını nasıl etkiledi (sınırlandırdı ya da zorladı)? İkincisi, realist teori, Hamis ve El-Fetih'in uzlaşısı ve yakınlaşma konusundaki tercihlerinde ortaya çıkan benzerlikleri ve farklılıkları anlamada bize yardımcı olur mu? 2011 yılından beri, Ortadoğudaki baskın devletler, hesapları ve kontrolleri ötesinde rekabet içerisindeki güçler ve büyük güç elde etmeye çalışan devletler ile devlet-dışı aktörlere yönelik tepkisel ve proaktif bir tutum sergilemektedir. Devlet dışı aktörler olan Hamis ve El-Fetih'in tepki gösterdiği anlaşmazlık, kendilerinin politik tercihlerine ve stratejilerine de işaret eden bölgesel dinamiklerin sınırlamaları ve fırsatlarına ilişkin bakış açılarındaki farklılıklara işaret eden önemli tedbirler/önlemler üzerindedir. Bu makale, özellikle sistemik ve iç faktörlerin karşılıklı etkileşiminin, iki rakip hareketi ulusal birliğin sağlanması noktasında oldukça farklı yörüngelere yerleştirdiği sonucuna varmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, her iki realist akım (neo-realizm ve neo-klasik realizm), farklı açıklama kapasitesi/fırsatları ile birlikte teorik çerçeve olarak uygun görünmektedir.

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses two main questions. First, how have regional dynamics and domestic pathologies since 2010 affected (i.e., constrained or delimited) Palestinian reconciliation and rapprochement? Second, can the realist theory of international relations (IR) help us understand the differences or similarities observed in Hamas's and Fatah's preferences for reconciliation and rapprochement? Since the turn of the decade, dominant states in the Middle East have become reactive (and proactive) toward state and non-state actors; they have become inclined to react to power magnitude and forces of competition beyond their calculations and control. The differential reactions of both non-state actors, Fatah and Hamas, is due in substantial measure to marked differences in the windows of opportunity, and constraints on regional dynamics that have affected their policy preferences and strategies. This article concludes that the interplay of systemic and domestic factors has notably set the two rival movements on distinctly different trajectories of national unity. In this sense, both streams of realism (neorealism and neoclassical realism) seem appropriate as theoretical frameworks, albeit with different explanatory power/opportunities.

1. Introduction

Since the close of the first decade of the 21st century, Fatah (Palestine National Liberation Movement) and Hamis (Islamic Resistance Movement) have found themselves confronted by unprecedented dynamics in the Middle East, the stage of their historical allies and beneficiaries. New challenges have unfolded in the wake of the Arab Spring

movement and thereafter. The Arab Spring movement nurtured growing dissatisfaction and tensions throughout the Palestinian territories. It inspired the explosion of a social movement with reformist tendencies and, in part, an independent affiliation that called for rapprochement between the two leading Palestinian political movements (Elgindy, 2011). It thus forced the two rival movements to

* Sorumlu yazar/Corresponding author.
e-posta: dr@philipp-amour.ch

face social disobedience and to address demands for national reconciliation and rapprochement (Darweish, 2013). In their undertakings to survive regional polarization and the potential domino effect in Palestine, Fatah and Hamas recognized policy choices (constraints and prospects) that were and are rationally (international relations (IR) concept) available to them. However, as the following pages demonstrate, Fatah and Hamas have perceived regional dynamics from different vantage points.

This article begins with the assumption that the latent reconfiguration of the regional order in the Middle East has not provided a genuine impetus toward unification for Fatah and Hamas; rather, it has increased political competition in the context of inter- and intra-party relations, particularly between and among the hegemonic factions of Fatah and Hamas. Empirically as illustrated below, it is evident that regional transition has tempted both Fatah and Hamas to bolster their partisan power and influence. It can be revealed that regional developments produced negative consequences for one specific actor (i.e., Fatah, then Hamas) and appeared to deliver a positive impact for the other actor (i.e., Hamas, then Fatah). This relationship changed moderately as the Arab Spring movement unfolded. During this process, the two rival movements were worried that the other would politically profit at the expense of themselves (Ghanem, 2013). Thus, self-survival and power consolidation, if not maximization, have enjoyed the upper hand within both movements as they have addressed the demand for national reconciliation. Both gave lip service to the objective of national unity as they aimed to shore up political legitimacy. In the following pages, I draw on streams of the realist theory of IR to explore the underlying factors.

The analysis of (in alphabetical order) Fatah-Hamas relations in this article considers the extraordinary power dynamics and regional polarization in the Middle East. In this regard, I operate under an additional assumption: in their attempts to change and subvert the unfolding regional order to their strategic ends, proactive higher states have limited the scope of maneuvering Fatah and Hamas toward reconciliation and rapprochement, for example, by geo-military means (e.g., Egypt, Israel) or strategic gravity (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Iran), when Palestinian unification did not conform with their security calculations and tactical interludes. Obviously, both levels of analysis, the regional and the domestic, have interacted herein. Regional polarization has aggravated the ideological, strategic and structural rifts between and within Fatah and Hamas, thus reinforcing the detachment on the Palestinian side and intensifying intra-party conflicts within the core streams of Fatah and Hamas (Tartir, 2012).

To pursue this inquiry, the next section introduces the theoretical frame: realism. The other sections examine Hamas's and Fatah's policies with regard to regional dynamics and reconciliatory preferences. I embrace the insights of realism and its different manifestations, neorealism and neoclassical realism, to project the power politics of states and non-state actors (i.e., Fatah and Hamas) in the Middle East and to shed light on how regional/domestic competition has constrained or delimited (affected) Palestinian unity. The aims of these sections are, first, to identify the underlying systemic (i.e., regional) and domestic factors that have contributed to national division and rifts between Fatah and Hamas and second, to test the

utilization of realism in the Palestinian case. The last section presents a preliminary analysis of Hamas (and Fatah) as non-state militant actors in the regional order of the Middle East.

2. Theoretical Framework

Different theories of IR have comparative advantages in offering insight into different directions of regional politics. Empirically, units (state and non-state actors) across the Middle East have been increasingly interacting in realist-type actor behaviors. The unusual severity of power competition and perpetual conflicts between and among states and non-state actors disclose the anarchic nature of the regional order in the Middle East. This empirical evidence fits the framework of realism.

Classical realism (CR) emphasizes the virtue of a balance of power as a stabilizing element among the interacting units of analysis (not the system as a whole) (Morgenthau, 1948; Claude, 1962). Stability is more likely when a balance of power is a feature of the relations among hegemonic actors within a regional order. A regional transition destabilizes a regional order and renders it rather prone to raw conflict; hence, rising powers and near-equal powers will use such a transition as a strategic opportunity for their bids for regional weight/power. Thus, from the realist perspective, a regional transition increases the likelihood of an imbalance of power within a regional order (Copeland, 2012).

Neorealism (NR) accords much attention to the so-called systemic factor: the military and economic capabilities of states are usually described as a distribution of power capabilities (Waltz, 2010). According to NR, changes in the distribution of power, also called systemic factors, explain states' attitudes and behaviors in a security system/regional order. Such an understanding of external behavior is traditionally top-down. According to NR, more powerful (i.e., dominant) units exert influence/power on less powerful units to realize their strategic ends. Two major forms, offensive and defensive realism, have dominated the neorealist paradigm (Mearsheimer, 2014; Waltz, 2010). The opening of a neorealist approach is an anarchic (international/regional) system characterized by continuing fear and aggression among equal or near-equal units. As a result, uncertainty about the attitudes and behaviors of other interacting units is prevalent (Copeland, 2012).

Persistent uncertainty and insecurity force states (and non-state actors) to increase their relative power weights in the regional order and beyond. Similar to classical realists, neorealists believe that equality between dominant states in terms of relative power makes deterrence and peace more likely, while inequality motivates rival states to bid more for power (in the form of armaments and alliance building), causing tension and conflict. Offensive realists argue that with such strategic calculus dominant, states will not refrain from using their leverage over less powerful units to consolidate or gain more dominant positions. Such anarchic competition will likely end once one superior regional state achieves regional hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2014). Defensive realists discard the must-happen war scenario among equal states (Waltz, 1995). Applying realist logic to the recent dynamics in the Middle East, it becomes apparent that CR and offensive realism apply to patterns of regional

dynamics. However, NR ignores domestic decision-making factors.

Neoclassical realism (NCR) incorporates systemic level factors and the unit level to explain the strategic calculations of states and non-state actors. NCR regards unit-level factors as primary and pays more attention to these factors than neorealism does. A second distinction of NCR is its inclusion of non-state actors. Whereas different manifestations of realism either do not accord much attention to non-state actors or regard them as vehicles for the power politics of higher states, NCR recognizes their role at a different level of analysis (Lobell et al., 2009; Taliaferro, 2012). Third, NCR integrates ideational/ideological parameters into its set of analyses, while other streams of realism assert material parameters (Kitchen, 2010). NCR is vital for research involving Fatah and Hamas, both of which are non-state actors.

According to different manifestations of realism, a regional transition and rising, unambiguous perceived risks at both the regional and domestic levels cause concerned security-driven states and non-state actors to synchronize their respective strategic policies. Forging or hindering regional alliances (formal and informal) is a common arrangement of states and non-state actors seeking (more) power at the cost of other actors to assure their survival and to balance the distribution of power (Develen and Özgür, 2009; Pressman, 2008; Schroeder, 1976; Walt, 1994; Weitsman, 2014).

3. The Regional System in the Middle East

The Middle East as a regional system consists of a multipolar order that possesses more than two dominant powers at the systemic level (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). Dominant regional powers are those states that possess higher power capability in the form of tangible resources of power (in particular, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates) and intangible resources of power, as in case of Qatar (Mingst, 2013; Nye, 1990). Traditionally, two groups have been involved as allies within the Middle East. The first is the conservative-“moderate,” including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and most Arab Gulf states, Egypt, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). This bloc is led by Saudi Arabia and is known for its benign attitudes toward Israel and the USA. The second bloc, the conservative-“resistance” bloc, consists of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas, among others. The Iran-led bloc is known for its critical stance toward Israel/USA. Eruptions in the political leadership in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere have facilitated the formation of a third bloc, which I call the elected-“reformist” camp, led by Turkey and Qatar (Amour, 2017). The rise of this novel alliance has intensified uncertainty and insecurity in the regional behavior of the established alliances. Dominant states in the Middle East have been reactive in nature to survive the anarchic system.

Regional revolts and counter-revolts have rapidly broken the regional order, leading the long-seated order away from (relative) stability and initiating regional transition. Fearing shifts in the unfolding regional balance of power to their strategic disadvantage, states and non-state actors have shown interest in and have attempted to project their power within the broad Middle East in the form of economic aid, politico-military and intelligence means, or destabilizing

crises, among other actions. The struggle for hegemony in the Gulf region and for influence and control in Yemen's, Libya's, Iraq's, Lebanon's, Syria's, or Palestine's politics provide some examples of the power competition and projection between and among these camps.

Since 2013, raw power-seeking actions and the severity of raw external behavior have intensified the intermittent inter-state and intra-state conflicts in the Middle East. Enmity between Iran and Saudi Arabia, above all, has polarized the Middle East into rival alliances, which increasingly have become offensive in nature. Indeed, state and non-state actors have become progressively revisionist and proactive in their external power politics, marking a shift in the (rather defensive nature of) external behaviors compared to pre-2010/2013. For this reason, I add a prefix (“neo”) to the mentioned blocs' identifications: the neoconservative-moderate camp and the neoconservative-resistance camp.

Remarkably, the two rival Palestinian movements, Fatah and Hamas, have operated within two different power blocs due to ideological and interest-based factors. The following section covers how regional transformation has constrained/delimited their sets of maneuvers with regard to intra-party negotiations of national reconciliation and rapprochement.

4. Hamas Upgrades within the Regional Dynamics (2010-2013)

Historically, Hamas has allied itself with Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, and it has become internationally recognized as part of the so-called conservative-resistance camp (El Husseini, 2010). Unfolding regional transition in the Middle East provided Hamas with a strategic opportunity for external balancing to form novel partnerships within the unfolding regional order. Hamas has recognized its unique strategic regional standing in 2011 and beyond as a beneficiary of the Arab Spring movement, in contrast to Fatah and Israel (Mish'al, 2013). As a result, Hamas moved its dependence to the new elected-reformist camp led by Turkey, Qatar and Egypt (Mursi-Administration) (Demirtaş, 2015). This alignment has improved Hamas' relationships with Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia, states that witnessed political changes to the advantage of Islamist-based political parties (Milton-Edwards, 2013). From the viewpoint of neoclassical realism, idea-based and interest-based motivations caused Hamas's alienation (Amour, 2018).

In entering into a novel alliance, Hamas's political bureau sought novel allies that would likely extend their effective strategic/security guarantee to Gaza in general and Hamas in particular (i.e., bystanding). Hamas likely hoped/expected that the new distribution of power in the region would end its diplomatic isolation and combat the economic sanctions maintained by Israel and co-implemented by the former Egyptian government (Milton-Edwards, 2013). Hamas's novel alignment could boost its internal balancing if its novel allies would address the humanitarian crisis of the Palestinians in Gaza (Howeidy, 2013). Hamas likely expected the new leadership in Cairo to reassert Egypt's role in the region as a regional power and an independent mediator (Hudson, 2011).

The aforementioned upgrade of Hamas's regional standing had implications for (geo)political affairs vis-à-vis Israel and Fatah, as was apparent, for example, in the unprecedented prisoner exchange between Israel and Hamas, October 2011, (Levy, 2011) together with the concessions that Israel made to Hamas's requests in the wake of the Pillar of Defense military operation in November 2012 (Milton-Edwards, 2013). Both agreements utilized, to a certain degree, changes in the distribution of power and acute insecurities in the Middle East. Hence, the agreements were (co)brokered by Egypt, they demonstrated the ensuing arrangement of Egypt's attitudes in the region with regard to policies and alliances (Munayyer, 2011). This shift in the regional balance of power (to the advantage of Hamas) was indicated by Netanyahu's justification of the prisoner swap: "With everything that is happening in Egypt and the region, I don't know if the future would have allowed us to get a better deal – or any deal at all for that matter." He added, "This is a window of opportunity that might have been missed" (Bronner, 2011). The concessions made by Israel and Hamas resulted in relative stability among the parties involved and led to improved conditions for the Palestinians in Gaza after the new political leadership in Cairo eased the crossing at Rafah (Panayiotides, 2012).

On the other front, Hamas's regional upgrade has significantly weakened Fatah's position in domestic affairs. Hamas's aforementioned (perceived or real) achievements in diplomacy and paramilitary resistance vis-à-vis Israel proved to have a psychological effect on the political landscape (Bronner and Farrell, 2011). They demonstrated to Palestinians (of both above mentioned streams) the importance of balancing to extract compromises from the Israeli side; they simultaneously demonstrated the futility of negotiated political reconciliation with the right-wing government in Israel (Pace, 2013). Hamas's achievements placed the moderate line (i.e., Fatah) in an awkward position because the agreements between Israel and Hamas showed that Israel was prepared to compromise on specific issues that it would otherwise have vetoed (Milton-Edwards, 2013). This awareness hardened the positions of followers of the moderate stream (inter alia, in Fatah) that political concessions cannot be negotiated with Israel's current leadership through political settlement (Bronner, 2012). Moreover, it strengthened the sense of marginalization and alienation that Fatah has experienced since the Oslo Accords and suggested that the moderate line could not gain the support of the Palestinians through the current policy (Black, 2011). The resistance stream won on the ground, leading to significant legitimization of Hamas in particular, while the moderate line (in Fatah) suffered a setback (Black, 2011). From the realist perspective, it was for Hamas to simultaneous challenge and maintain these gains and to approach reconciliation with Fatah.

Organized according to its prospective alliance (Egypt and Qatar), the Hamas political leadership in exile entered inter-party negotiations with Fatah. The Cairo agreement (2011) and Doha agreement (2012) were intended to end inter-party divisions (Booth et al., 2014). On the ground, however, the local leadership of Hamas holds a high level of autonomy. On its part, it did not facilitate the implementation of the reconciliation with Fatah. Hamas has consolidated its relative power in the Gaza Strip vis-à-vis Fatah (and Israel).

In light of its regional strategic weight, it did not see the need for reconciliation with Fatah, which it perceived as a loser of regional dynamics; hence, such a process would result in a decrease in Hamas's power on the ground and in its control over Gaza. Underbalancing by choice at this stage was likely not a matter of consideration by the local leadership. This disagreement between the exiled and local leadership resulted in a crisis within Hamas regarding the attention of the public. The mentioned unit level is not the only clarification for relations between Hamas and Fatah.

At this stage, the systemic level (regional) was not binding for national reconciliation. The competition between the different above alluded regional subsystems impacted Fatah-Hamas relations negatively. In this sense, drawing upon realist principles, regional higher states would be rather tempted to manipulate the less powerful units for their own rationales. This systemic condition at the regional level coincided with the demand of the Quartet (on the global level) of having Hamas comply with its conditions. In other words, the influenceability of the systemic level (regional and global) is high to hamper reconciliation.

5. PLO/PNA/Fatah Policy Orientation (2010-2013)

The Arab Spring movement across the Middle East arrived in Palestine early 2011. Palestinians demanded national reconciliation between the two rival movements and the annulment of the economic Paris Protocol with Israel (Erakat, 2011; Abu-Shahla, 2011; Al-Ghoul, 2013). For decades, the PLO and its mainstream political arm, Fatah, promised the Palestinians an independent sovereign state, peace, and economic growth. However, for many Palestinians, not much has been accomplished on the ground, with the exception of small-scale, isolated, and geographically disconnected Palestinian national autonomy (Barahmeh, 2014). The Arab Spring movement thus pressured the PLO regarding the validity of its national project of state building and, as such, the failure of the peace process with Israel's right-wing government. Moreover, it subjected Fatah to its inter-party rivalry with Hamas.

Confronted by public protests on the West Bank, obstacles to the peace negotiations with Israel, and changes in the regional order to its strategic disadvantage, the PLO (and Fatah) was one of the greatest losers of the Arab Spring movement in the wake of 2011 and beyond. While Hamas's internal and external balancing was advancing, Fatah lost Egypt as a historical ally during the Muslim Brotherhood administration, and it lost the full support of states from the neoconservative-moderate camp that preferred to wait for regional developments before taking a position within the new regional order (strategic silence) (Malley, 2011). The article above suggested that Hamas had a strong preference for regional alignment; Fatah, in contrast, did not display such a policy disposition for alignment due to the political and ideological preferences of Fatah's leadership, its perception of the Arab Spring movement as an Islamist uprising, and its dependency on the neoconservative-moderate camp and its global patron (the USA). Per NCR, its policy choices have remained in conformity with its historical allies. PLO/Fatah policy makers were likely aware of regional constraints during this period. Regional transition

in the Middle East gave Fatah an incentive to reconsider its policy choices toward Hamas and Israel.

Fatah showed willingness to participate in concession talks with Hamas in Cairo and Doha, as noted above (Beinin, 2012). Aware of the opposition of the international system and regional powers to reconciliation with Hamas, Fatah did not consider making major compromises. Playing lip service to the public audience with regard to inter-party reconciliation and testing how far Hamas would compromise in real politics were the policy rationales of Fatah's leadership. Hamas's local leadership, however, did not cooperate/compromise with the expectations of Fatah (Amour, 2018).

Notably, the regional drive motivated policy and decision makers to reconsider the PLO's approach to negotiations with Israel and its long-term (grand) strategy of state building (Palestine Strategy Study Group, 2008). Fearing a Palestinian Spring, the PLO believed that it could not make compromises with Israel that would fuel popular discontent and further damage its popular legitimacy. The Obama administration tolerated this policy orientation, among others, due to its criticism of Israel's expansion policy (Lynch, 2015).

In response to the domestic/regional context, policy makers developed a strategic framework that, in retrospect, was mainly located in two areas. First, Palestinian representatives intensified an anticipatory foreign policy toward different states to bilaterally gain the acknowledgment of Palestine as an independent state based on its pre-1967 borders with Israel (BBC News, 2012). Second, Palestinian representatives followed a diplomatic course by attempting to gain recognition by international organizations, such as the UN (Ashrawi, 2012; Pace, 2013). External balancing through global governance is beyond the major scope of classical and neorealism.

The PLO saw in the revolutionary stimuli of the Middle East an opportunity to foster tangible prospects for the recognition of an independent Palestinian state at the international level (Khoury, 2012; Leech, 2015). In the spirit of the new developments in the Middle East toward democratization and self-determination, the PLO leadership likely posited that the international community would support the recognition of a Palestinian state. Thus, in September 2011, the PLO formally requested full UN membership for Palestine (BBC News, 2012).

This UN bid, however, did not come to a vote because recognition by the UNSC required the unanimous backing of the veto powers. The Palestinians did not have such undisputed support. The USA did not support Palestine's full statehood bid and believed that it was a vehicle for undermining Israel's position in international organizations, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Mozgovaya and Ravid, 2012). This real event politics confirms the top-down insights of NR and confirms in this case the importance of the international level over sub-levels. As a result, the PLO submitted a downgraded version of its application for full membership to the attention of the UN General Assembly (Caspi, 2014).

Statehood for Palestinians gained enormous support from the UNGA. It upgraded the status of the Palestinians from that

of a permanent UN "observer entity" to that of a permanent "non-member state" observer (United Nations, 2012). The UNGA's upgrade of the state of Palestine was strategic for the Palestinians' grand strategy, notwithstanding the juridical limitations of the upgrade (Kontorovich, 2013; Ronen, 2014). International endorsement of Palestinian statehood is symbolic in nature: it features international support for the rights of the Palestinians to self-determination, and it underlines the legitimacy of their claim to a viable sovereign state. Moreover, the success of the bid emphasizes the UNGA's support of the two-state solution and its support for an independent sovereign Palestinian state within the pre-1967 boundaries (Pogodda and Richmond, 2015).

Although the systemic level (mobilizing revolutionary drive in the Middle East) might explain the timing of Palestinian strategic-tactical orientation, the unit level provides a further explanation: to a substantial degree, the pursuit of statehood was the result of growing Palestinian suspicions among moderate streams about Israel's practices in the occupied Palestinian territories and major concerns about Israel's right-wing government refusal to produce peace (Khamaisi, 2010). The moderate Palestinian stream has regarded the Israeli expansion and escalation of colonies (settlements) as a frightening indication of Israel's rational intentions and a classic example of the "salami tactics" of changing facts on the ground (Gordon and Cohen, 2012). From Palestinian perspectives, this suspected policy of Israel's right-wing government is directly contrary to the rights of Palestinians; it challenged the political legitimacy of the moderate camp (Muasher, 2014).

In the Palestinian territories, diplomatic success was regarded as a move toward the (future) recognition of an independent sovereign state. This success has mitigated the impact of public discontent in the West Bank and, to a lesser degree, in the Gaza Strip; in addition, it has likely restored some legitimacy to the PLO/PNA/Fatah (MacFarquhar and Myers, 2011; Pace, 2013). Unfolding regional dynamics have changed the intra-Palestinian equations.

6. Hamas's Downgrade within the Regional Dynamics (2013-2018)

Hamas was considered a winner in the Arab Spring uprisings (2010-2013), whereas the loser in the evolving regional order appeared to be the PLO/PNA/Fatah in 2011 and beyond. However, the later course of the Arab Spring did not proceed according to the expectations of either Hamas or Fatah. As events have demonstrated, Hamas relied too heavily on the evolving external configuration (i.e., an Islamist renaissance from its perspectives). In retrospect, Hamas's novel foreign policy orientation, deliberated above, was not well defined, and its regional orientation was not consistently grounded. These bad policy decisions (measured in retrospect upon their outcomes) caused Hamas's regional downgrade and geo-strategic isolation.

Since June 2013, the changes in the state leadership in Cairo have revived tensions between the Egyptian regime and Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was illegalized (Associated Press, 2015). As part of heightened security in the Sinai Peninsula, Cairo has enacted strict controls on the Gaza border, closing the Rafah

boundary's crossing to both people and goods. Moreover, it has intensified its demolition of tunnels that connected the Gaza Strip to Egypt and, *inter alia*, that helped the Palestinians to overcome the economic siege. Similar to Egypt, Israel has intensified its land, air and sea blockade of the Gaza Strip. This geo-strategic isolation has negatively affected the economy in the Gaza Strip. Hamas is unable to find a solution to its financial problems (Alquds, 2015) as well as to the economic and humanitarian misery in Gaza that has fueled political competition, including more radical groups (Schweitzer, 2015). Moreover, the siege of Gaza and the stand-off with the neoconservative-resistance camp have negatively impacted Hamas's long-term maintenance, consolidation, and advancement of its military capabilities (Blade, 2015).

Since its degradation (the exit of Egypt), the proactive democratic-elected camp has not proved itself to be of the same value to Hamas. Qatar and Turkey, Hamas's new allies, have supported Hamas diplomatically and financially to overcome economic hardships (Lindenstrauss and Kivam, 2014; Stephens, 2012). However, they have not compensated for the shortfall of paramilitary training and the (alleged) arming of the neoconservative-resistance camp (Ezbidi, 2013). Moreover, neither ally could compensate for the geo-strategic weight of Egypt's neighboring of Gaza and Israel. This weight was apparent in the Gaza Battle of 2014. Palestinian paramilitary capabilities proved insufficient on their own to be translated into strategic ends; hence, they were not accompanied by a diplomatic reinforcement of a regional or international power that might have encouraged Israel to make concessions. Thus, in the aftermath of the Gaza Battle of 2014, Israel was not open to concessions in contrast to 2012 because of the disappearance of a regional broker (for Israel's policy during the Arab Spring movement, see Amour, 2017). Furthermore, later developments in the Middle East have placed enormous pressure on the novel allies to the strategic disadvantage of Hamas.

Hamas's leadership seems to be aware of the harsh external environment in the Middle East in general and in Egypt in particular in that its regional downgrade limits and complicates Hamas's room for maneuvering. Accordingly, from the contemporaneous perspective, Hamas seems to be one of the greatest losers of the Arab Spring (see Schanzer, 2013). Therefore, Hamas has been struggling to find a strategy for its survival since 2013. Hamas has undertaken steps to draw closer to the neoconservative-moderate camp (Abu-Amer, 2015). The Saudi-led camp, however, has not promoted the inclusion of Hamas as a political and military ally in the region for many reasons, including its origin within the Muslim Brotherhood, its stand-off with Jordan and the deterioration of its relations with Egypt, its historical ties with Iran, and its ideological rigidity *vis-à-vis* the west and Israel (Danan, 2014; The New Arab, 2016). Additionally, Hamas attempted to reestablish its relations with the neoconservative-resistance camp (Abu-Amer, 2015; Raialyoun, 2015) but with limited success given its unchanging position regarding the Syrian Spring/Civil War. Allegedly, Hamas's efforts to draw closer to one camp have increased the skepticism of the other camp toward the movement.

Moreover, Hamas's leadership is probably aware that such a realignment with Iran would not end the strategic siege by

Egypt/Israel, and both states compete (as allies of the neoconservative-moderate camp) in the regional order against Iran. The intensity of polarization in the Middle East seems to restrict Hamas's choices of maneuvering the political course out of the current hardship. The downgrade of Hamas's regional standing changed the balance on the Fatah-Hamas front. As a result, Hamas had to reevaluate its position, adjust its political course, and show more willingness to consider concessions to the PLO/Fatah (Kuttab, 2014). The dilemma of Hamas's leadership in Gaza has been how to reconcile with Fatah without losing its strategic weight in Gaza, which seems essential for the leadership after its regional downgrade. A domestic downgrade by choice was not a matter of consideration. Future dynamics will show how far Hamas's newly elected leadership (2017) is willing to compromise *vis-à-vis* Fatah to avoid public disorder and economic misery.

7. Fatah and National Reconciliation Post-Arab Spring (2013-2018)

The PLO/PNA/Fatah did not regain the support of regional allies that it enjoyed prior to the Arab Spring movement. Shaping a new Middle East according to its strategic rationale, the alliance of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain opened a second channel to Mahmoud Dahlan, a (former) Fatah leader and a rival of Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the PLO/PNA/Fatah, while keeping its relations with PLO/PNA/Fatah at a convenient minimum. This mentioned position has impacted the PLO's relations with other states, such as Jordan, affecting the PLO's regional relations with considerable deliberation. Thus, it seems that both Fatah and Hamas are, in many respects, major losers in the regional dynamics.

With regard to rapprochement with Hamas, two lines of analysis can be discussed. First, during this period, there was no more urgency at the micro-level for Fatah to reconcile with Hamas due to the thwarting of the so-called Arab Spring movement in general and in Palestine in particular (Amour, 2018). As a result, the intra-state anarchy suggests that Fatah would await the weakening of Hamas to gain more fruitful concessions in the foreseeable future in Fatah's favor while clamping down hard on the movement to force such compromises. The PNA/Fatah's policy behaviors of decreasing the PNA's workforce in Gaza and regulating electricity there have resulted in Hamas relative compromises. Second, an attempt at rapprochement with Hamas was also likely to be alluring for Fatah's leadership (as a balancing act at the systemic level) to assess *vis-à-vis* the regional allies that oppose such proximity. Such an attempt would also alleviate public discomfort over the national division (Yaari and Zilber, 2014).

Different rational factors of self-help and self-survival have shifted both movements toward reconciliation talks. The reconciliation (Shati refugee camp) agreement signed in April 2014 was intended to end inter-movement estrangement and division (Booth et al., 2014). At this stage, Hamas was under enormous pressure and was willing to make concessions that it previously opposed. To appease Fatah and to overcome Western opposition and possible economic sanctions, Hamas agreed to give up formal politics (Kuttab, 2015). The treaty saw a national unity government

including no members of Hamas, and the government's program was harmonized with the demands of the Quartet in the aftermath of Hamas's success in the 2006 legislative elections (Kuttab, 2014). Disputed issues, such as the reconstruction of the security forces of Hamas in the Gaza Strip or security cooperation of Fatah with Israel, remained unaddressed (Shuttlerworth and Cunningham, 2015).

The fiasco of this reconciliation attempt demonstrates how regional factors interplayed with domestic factors to harm Palestinian attempts of unity. Israel and the USA opposed the reconciliation deal and demanded that the PLO annul the pact (Abunimah, 2011; Byman, 2011; Pratt, 2013). Additionally, Israel sanctioned the PNA for this unification agreement with Hamas. Furthermore, shortly after realization of the unity government, Israel attacked the Gaza Strip (2014). This battle placed additional expectations on the new unity government with regard to humanitarian needs and security expectations that it could not meet (Booth et al., 2014).

Israel's military operation boosted intra-state anarchy in Palestine. It fueled dissimilarities and increased the tensions between the rival movements. Fatah and Hamas do not share a common vision for a national approach with regard to ending the Israeli occupation and building a national sovereign state. Whereas Fatah is committed to political settlement as its approach to building a Palestinian state (Amour, 2013), Hamas believes that militant struggle is a viable strategy to restore Palestine. Competition between the two rival factions for the leadership of the Palestinians has also resulted in a lack of consensus regarding related reconciliatory issues, such as the choice of a prime minister and the rebuilding of the national security forces, which has hindered implementation of the agreements (Beinin, 2012). Moreover, political tension was not only an inter-party affair; it was an intra-party matter as well. The decision-making apparatus that must consent to reconciliation with Fatah has no consensus. Tactical tensions within the leadership of Hamas (and within the PLO) (Alquds Al-Arabi Online, 2012) have complicated and hindered implementation of above mentioned conciliatory treaties. The divide in Hamas embodies the unambiguous model of entangled interests and relations in exile, on the one hand, and in the occupied Palestinian territories, on the other hand.

The disagreements between Fatah and Hamas have intensified significantly during the Arab Spring, with regard to Israel's and Egypt's security needs (Balousha, 2014). The neoconservative-moderate camp (including Fatah) has shown understanding of Israel's security needs and has criticized the paramilitary actions of Hamas as causing Palestinian casualties during and beyond Israel's military operations. The neoconservative-resistance camp, in contrast, has criticized Israel's raw policy behavior against the Palestinians (Booth et al., 2014).

Domestic and regional polarization has put the PLO/Fatah under further pressure. Aware that the PLO/PNA/Fatah does not possess the resources or the external support to conduct independent domestic or foreign policy vis-à-vis Hamas or the neoconservative-moderate camp (and its allies Israel and the USA), Abbas has criticized Hamas for its policy choices against Israel and has avoided rapprochement attempts. For Hamas, it became apparent that its (resistance) material

capabilities are one of its last self-survival cards. The choice of appeasing Fatah or its allies to the last end was and still seems not to be a matter of consideration. Regarding internal factors, both parties have failed to give up positions that are necessary for concessions to materialize. For instance, Hamas refused to hand over the border crossings and governmental posts to the new government. The PNA, on its side, refused to pay the salaries of employees hired by the Hamas government (Kuttab, 2014).

8. Current State of Play at the Systemic Level

From the aforementioned insights into regional polarization and competition, it is apparent that the regional behavior of higher states has become so intensely volatile that less powerful states and non-state actors are forced to react to power magnitude and forces of competition in the Middle East to a level beyond their control and calculations. Indeed, extraordinary regional polarization has increased the asymmetry of the relations (inequality, in mutuality) of both Fatah and Hamas vis-à-vis their geo-strategic neighbors and allies. Both non-state actors can be considered peripheral actors in the regional order.

Although Qatar and Egypt, among others, have promoted the reconciliation process, their efforts have been mediatory and not binding. In other words, regional higher powers did not press for reconciliation and rapprochement. Israel and the USA have opposed it. Recently, however, the current regional and international environment has seemed to indicate a shift that must still be verified. The crisis between the new alliance (including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt) and Qatar seems to have opened an opportunity for Palestinian reconciliation. In an effort to bolster its position vis-à-vis Iran and to weaken Qatar's (and Turkey's) regional power, Egypt (and the UAE) played a reactive role and pressed the two rival movements for talks. Reconciliation would give the neoconservative-moderate axis an opportunity to minimize Hamas's special relations with the Muslim Brotherhood. This process apparently came across as Saudi Arabia's will to achieve regional hegemony at all costs vis-à-vis Iran and the Qatar-Turkey lead axis.

Cairo has a direct motive to intervene reactively in the reconciliations talks. Having a reliable address in Gaza to apply security measurements against terrorism in Sinai is one motivation to press for national unification. National reconciliation would improve the living conditions for Palestinians in Gaza, which could decrease any potential problems that could cross its northern Sinai border. Cairo most likely operates in agreement with Israel and the USA. Unlike previous settlements, Israel and the USA have refrained from the use of raw force or threats to hinder national unification. The departure of Hamas from the orbit of Iran and the Qatar-Turkey orbit is in Israel's favor.

The latest national reconciliation comes amid USA efforts to launch a peace process between Israel and the Palestinians involving the larger Arab world. It is believed that Palestinian unity would increase such potential (Pearlman, 2017). At the core of this effort was the application of substantial pressure on Hamas and Fatah to reconsider reconciliation. The systemic factor, along with Egypt's hegemonic manifestation, seems essential for national unification. This constellation involving the regional and

international level has been absent so far. Against this background, neorealism and its top-down view of politics help to explain mediatory moves and the scope and extent of current interventions.

However, this systemic drive can shift for those aforementioned higher states that are not per se committed to Palestinian national unity or to the promotion of peace. Instead, and in agreement with realism, higher states in the Middle East have been involved in the rational utilization of their interests and maximization of their power. Within this process, higher states have entangled internal and external balancing. From these perspectives, attempts at Palestinian unification have been a means toward another objective: bolstering higher states' regional power and obliging the current US president to engage in regional affairs. Remarkably, realist calculations and reactive measures will hardly lead to rapprochement and reconciliation on their own. Thus, the durability of national reconciliation depends on Palestinian leaders' abilities to endure regional polarization and to bear their own destructive pathologies (best-case scenario). In this sense, aspects at the unit level (where NCR plays) are important to enable national unification. The future of Palestinian unity between Fatah and Hamas remains at best unclear for the foreseen future. Previous failed reconciliation agreements have delivered clues regarding the expected reactions of Fatah and Hamas (worst-case scenario). Indeed, the passed months have shown that highlighted efforts by Cairo to bring Fatah and Hamas together did not form a transformational momentum for reconciliation and rapprochement despite the role of the systemic factor in form of Cairo's intervention on both sides. Factors behind the failure of the unification attempts result from the disagreements of both rival movements on issues mentioned above such as security in/on Gaza, collecting taxes, and paying salaries of employees hired by the Hamas government. Such reasoning demonstrates, once again, that ideological parameter and interest-based motivations hindered national unification. Thus, the unit level (NCR) seems to have the leading rule in enlightening Palestinian estrangement and division. Hopes that current unanticipated regional dynamics might open new opportunities for Fatah and Hamas to break regional and local barriers posed by hegemonic powers and party preferences have proven to be a temporary aberration.

9. Conclusion

This article attempted to examine two main issues. First, how have regional interactions and local preferences impacted the process of unification between the rival movements, Fatah and Hamas, since 2010. Second, the empirical application of different types of realism, in particular neorealism and neoclassical realism, to Palestinian division and dissension.

The article demonstrated how regional transformation has inhibited/delimited Fatah's and Hamas's sets of maneuvers with regard to intra-movement negotiations of national reconciliation and rapprochement. The variance in which the two movements have reacted is due in substantial measure to marked differences in the windows of constraint and opportunity that regional dynamics have offered as well as to leaders' pathologies, such as policy preferences and strategies (from the neoclassical realism perspective). From

the viewpoint of the neorealist theory, there is good evidence that a portion of the movements' reticence to pursue reconciliation was, in fact, related to regional upgrade/downgrade (as in the case of Hamas) or the opposition of higher powers (as in the case of Fatah). Due to its regional strategic upgrade, Hamas did not recognize an opportunity of reconciliation with Fatah. During this period, Hamas likely hoped Fatah would compromise due to its loss in regional politics. Moreover, Hamas likely expected, the regional transformation would establish a diplomatic a bridge to the Quartet and Western States resulting in a vital integration of Hamas in regional and domestic politics. Fatah did not consider underbalancing vis-à-vis Hamas hence the regional order was still unfolding; its policy choices have remained in conformity with its historical allies, the neoconservative-moderate camp.

Indeed, empirical evidence alluded above confirms this analysis; regional polarization did not promote national reconciliation and rapprochement between Fatah and Hamas; instead, it increased intra-state anarchy in Palestine. Since 2011, systemic incentives have dominated the policy choices of Fatah and Hamas so that Palestinian leaders have not been free to act as they would like. In the wake of their power rivalry in the Middle East, regional dominant states hampered Palestinian unification. However, these regularities were most likely rare occasions and limited to short intervals (Wivel, 2017). In this sense, this article shows the actual efficacy of the systemic factor for Palestinian division/unity.

At this point, it would tempting to argue that neorealism is the most appropriate stance to untangle the inter-movement division between Fatah and Hamas. I believe that the leaderships' preferences of Fatah and Hamas have predetermined the course of the domestic (and regional) policies of Fatah and Hamas. The leaderships' pathologies explain why Fatah and Hamas have acted/reacted on different tracks to national unity. Idea-based (e.g., resistance, right to governance) as well as interest-based (e.g., control over Gaza and its resources) have hindered Fatah and Hamas from rapprochement and unification. Hamas' preferences collides with Fatah's/PLO's/PNA's ideational (e.g., peace negotiations, international conformity) and interest-based (e.g., control over Gaza and its resources) parameters. Remarkably, the policy attitudes and behaviors of the two rival movements have confirmed the inter-party self-help and self-survival real politics of Fatah and Hamas.

The fiasco of reconciliation treaties, mentioned above, demonstrates how regional factors interplayed with domestic factors to harm national unification. I believe that domestic preferences (unit level) have the leading role in explaining the robustness of division and rift between Fatah and Hamas. The findings of this article suggest that NCR could better analyze and explain the Palestinian case due to its inclusive opportunities for different levels of analysis.

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