

Convo with Mouin, 9-1-25

A 40-minute [conversation](#), conducted September 1, 2025

[Helena Cobban]

I'm delighted to be here in a conversation with Mouin Rabaani, who is one of the most astute analysts of intra-Palestinian political relationships and the broader regional and global perspective. So my first question, Mouin, comes from something that I wrote recently, where I was arguing that the matter of intra-Palestinian reconciliation, that is primarily between, you know, the Fatah-led PLO-PA-State of Palestine [on the one hand] and Hamas and the resistance [on the other], has to be a central piece of any successful diplomacy to end the genocide and the occupation of Gaza.

But have I got it all wrong, Mouin?

[Mouin Rabbani]

No, I think you've got it essentially right. But I also feel there are multiple dimensions to this issue. So if I just take a few minutes to go into the history, when the Palestinian guerrilla movements took over the PLO in the wake of the 1967 war, and until the 1980s, the idea of incorporating the predecessor of Hamas, the various branches of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine into the PLO never came up, because the Muslim Brotherhood was essentially a quiescent organization that prioritized missionary work, social work, what it called the Islamization of Palestinian society over the confrontation with Israel.

And therefore, people, let's say Islamists, who prioritized the confrontation with Israel over the types of issues that the Muslim Brotherhood was engaged in, tended to join Fatah, because Fatah, it needs to be recalled, you know, its sole principle was nationalism and its members couldn't be formally affiliated with any other movement or organization. But apart from that, it was an ideological supermarket. You had Marxists, nationalists, liberals, conservatives, Islamists, all active within the broad framework that was Fatah.

Then in the late 1980s, Hamas was established. And because of the increasing challenges that Fatah and more broadly, the PLO was encountering in meeting its strategic objectives, Hamas began to gain in popularity. You know, I think the secret to Hamas's success is that it managed to successfully fuse Islamism and nationalism.

And that's really when it began to take off. And I believe it was in the very late 1980s or early 1990s, that you had the first meetings between Fatah and Hamas. I believe they were initially held in Sudan, about exploring ways of integrating Hamas into the PLO.

And Hamas at the time made rather outlandish demands. I think, you know, if Fatah had made a counter-offer, it would have probably offered it one or at most two seats. So there was this whole, the first issue is the integration of Hamas into the PLO.

And the problem is that by the time that became a serious issue during the 1990s, Hamas had achieved sufficient popularity, that it would have been extremely difficult to integrate it

into the PLO without substantially affecting the predominant position of Fatah within the PLO. So that's essentially why it failed at the time.

The second issue concerns the schism that emerged between Fatah and Hamas in the wake of the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections in the occupied territories.

I think the conventional wisdom that Hamas could have never successfully contested any Palestinian election and could have never entered the PLO in a dominant position while Yasser Arafat remained alive: I think that conventional wisdom is essentially correct. After he was removed from the scene in November 2004, Abbas faced a dual challenge. He wanted to tame the Fatah movement. And personally, I think that was his priority. And secondly, he wanted to incorporate Hamas into the Palestinian political system so that it would be subject to the decisions of the Palestinian authority and no longer in a position to undermine them.

At the same time, Hamas was interested in translating its popularity during the second intifada into institutional power. And so *the formula that was agreed upon was not Hamas integration into the PLO, but rather Hamas integration into the Palestinian authority through the legislative elections in 2006. And here again, I think Abbas's assumption was that there would be a sufficient bloc of Hamas members of parliament to keep Fatah in check, but they would be a minority.*

So on the one hand, you would have Hamas within Palestinian institutions, and at the same time, be required to accept the decisions of the majority.

Well, of course, it didn't quite turn out that way. Hamas won those elections with a veto-proof majority. It did not win a majority of the votes. Fatah essentially defeated itself by running multiple lists that, in many constituencies, allowed the Hamas candidates to slip through as those with the largest number of votes. But overall, I think it won something on the order of 40 to 45 percent of the vote.

And then you had a situation where Fatah, which had essentially exercised hegemony in one way or another over the Palestinian national movement since the late 1960s, took the attitude, well, one election really changes nothing. And so we're going to continue with business as usual. Well, Hamas took the exact opposite approach, which is that, well, the single election changes everything and renders the previous 40 years of Palestinian history irrelevant. We're in charge now.

And I think it's in that context that you began to see the increasing and increasingly violent rivalry between Fatah and Hamas in 2006 and 2007. Although I would make clear that ultimately, the real problem was that the Palestinian leadership of Mahmoud Abbas refused to provide Hamas with the opportunity to govern, which they had been entitled to as a result of the 2006 election results, working in close cooperation and coordination with Israel, with the United States, with the European Union, and to an extent also the United Nations in the context of the Quartet.

The existing Palestinian leadership went out of its way to sabotage Hamas's efforts to integrate into the Palestinian Authority. And in 2007, were actually preparing to launch an

armed attack on it in the Gaza Strip. And Hamas launched what I think has rightfully been characterized as a preemptive coup. It seized power in the Gaza Strip and since then has ruled the Gaza Strip hegemonically. And this is essentially, so we're dealing with a schism on two levels.

The question of Hamas's integration into the PLO on the one hand, and the second, the open split between these two movements in the context of the Palestinian Authority. And many people have suggested, for example, I'm thinking here of the leading Palestinian analyst and commentator Hani al-Masri in Ramallah, and others who have argued now for over a decade that if you want to resolve this issue, you really shouldn't focus on the Palestinian Authority. Because when you talk about the Authority, you're talking about kind of who gets how much of the pie.

Whereas if you talk about finding ways to integrate Hamas and for that matter, Islamic Jihad into the PLO, then you're really talking about core national issues, issues of strategy, issues of strategic objectives, issues of representation.

And I just make one final point that since 2007, there have been a series of agreements reached between Hamas and Fatah and the Palestinian Authority. And I think these have failed essentially because of two issues.

The first is that on the PA side, there has been an increasing distinction between Fatah as a political movement on the one hand, and the Palestinian Authority as an institution on the other. The PA is often presented as kind of an institution that is fully controlled by Fatah and operates as part of the Fatah movement. I think that was fairly accurate for the first decade or two of the PA's existence.

But I think *what we have now is a PA that operates autonomously, if not independently, of the Fatah movement. The Fatah movement, as a result of Abbas's policies, is in an increased, is in an advanced state of disintegration. And you really have, I would argue, a PA leadership and elite that operates separately from Fatah and for whom Fatah has no more than, let's say, a slogan.*

And while it's true that there are forces within both Fatah and Hamas who are invested in the schism, who profit more from the lack of what's called national reconciliation, it's also true that on repeated occasions, they have reached agreements. You have the Prisoners Document already from before the schism. You had all various agreements signed in Cairo after the schism, in Mecca in 2007, more recently in Beijing and in Cairo yet again.

And what it shows is that there are leaderships within both movements that are prepared to reach an agreement and to move forward with that agreement. And on virtually every occasion, the insurmountable obstacle to the implementation of those agreements has not been the leadership within the Fatah movement or the leadership within the Hamas movement, but rather the office of the titular head of Fatah, the titular head of the PA, the titular head of the PLO, the titular head of virtually everything else in the Palestinian world: Mahmoud Abbas. And I've argued for years that so long as Mahmoud Abbas remains on the scene, there can be no reconciliation between these two movements because he will always act to sabotage it.

If I can just in my lengthy soliloquy, just make one final point. I think another question needs to be asked now, which is that given the obvious weakening of Hamas, given the increasing disintegration of Fatah, given the disintegration really of the PLO and the PA under the watchful eye of Mahmoud Abbas, I think we need to talk about more than just relations between these two Palestinian movements. We're really talking about the future of the Palestinian national movement as a whole.

Will it survive in the form that we have known it in the past two decades? Or are we talking essentially about movements that will continue to exist at best as skeletons, as living corpses, while new forms of Palestinian mobilization, new and different forms emerge?

[Helena Cobban]

That's really fantastic. Thank you so much for all of that, Mouin. So I want to go back a little bit into the history because you picked out two points, when Hamas was founded in the late 1980s and then when the schism happened in 2006.

I really appreciate what you said about, for example, Mahmoud Abbas having sort of encouraged Hamas to take part in those elections in 2006 as a way to provide a counter maybe to the Fatah grassroots. That's what I took from what you said. Maybe it wasn't what you intended.

But I want to go back to a bit more history because I think it's important, first of all, for a general listenership to understand quite richly this relationship between Fatah and the PLO and the PA. As you noted, Mahmoud Abbas is the titular head of all of them. He's actually the head of all of them, but whether Fatah still exists as a coherent entity, for quite a long time, maybe it hasn't.

So another point here that I think is also relevant is the fact that Gaza has acted as the crucible for both Fatah back in the day and for Hamas more recently. You know, my book on the PLO that I wrote back in 1982, '83, and it came out in 1984-- That delved into the history of Fatah's organizing in a Gaza that was still reeling from the 1948 Nakba.

There were real sort of militant grassroots organizations at that point spreading out from Gaza to the West Bank and Jordan. Of course, the West Bank had not yet been occupied and neither had Gaza, but it was hard for those people in Gaza to communicate with, coordinate with Palestinians elsewhere.

So then Fatah took over the PLO, which had been established by Arab states.

And I think it's important to kind of, as we look at the Palestinian history, recognize this sort of relationship between what you might call the sort of the institutional, official institutions, okay, not well said, but, and the grassroots organizations. So PLO had been founded by the Arab states and then Fatah and its comrades in the other militant factions took it over in 1968 in the wake of the defeat of the Arab states in 1967. And then we had the PLO's-- can you call them glory days?

You can call them what you want. Through the seventies, you know, they got hounded out of Jordan. They got attacked in Lebanon, most fatally, obviously in 1982, when the leadership had to decamp to Tunis.

So at that same time you had, this is just a potted history. You had the indigenous movement inside the homeland arising from '82 onwards. And that's kind of the last chapters of my book, chapter of my book is, is how, you know, the indigenous movement that led to the first intifada in December of 1987 and also thereby to the emergence of Hamas, how that emerged in the aftermath of the expulsion from Beirut.

So you had the leadership in Tunis desperately trying to establish its relevance and it did so in 1993 through the Oslo agreement. And I think the centrality of what happened at Oslo needs to be fully like put into the story because it was at Oslo that Yasser Arafat for whatever reason sold himself and the movement to this concept of an "interim self-governing authority." And I think it's always really important to put that whole name into, people call it the PA, like Palestinian Authority.

[Mouin Rabbani]

Palestinian Interim Self-Governing Authority.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah. So it was supposed to last for five years and here we are 30 years later.

[Mouin Rabbani]

Yes.

[Helena Cobban]

And that has the kind of the institutional, well, you know, they do negotiations with the Europeans and the Americans and the Israelis over all kinds of things, but they were, you can call it the bastard love child of the Oslo agreement, which was concluded by the PLO and the government of Israel. So then the PA is subordinate to that.

[Mouin Rabbani]

Yes.

[Helena Cobban]

So I'm really interested in what you say, what you cite Hani al-Masri saying that actually the focus should be not on the PA, but on the PLO as the broader national resistance movement. That's one important point to make, but how about this thing called the State of Palestine, which is also an offshoot of the PLO rather than of the PA, right?

[Mouin Rabbani]

Well, I think first of all, it's important to understand what the PLO is. The PLO is not a party as such. It's not a movement as such.

Yes, it has a distinct institutional presence and identity, but we should think of it more as kind of a national front. In other words, the PLO is the umbrella organization under which various Palestinian nationalist movements operate, and that's where the real power and authority and mobilization lies. So within the PLO, if you go back to the 1970s, you had, for example, Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, an alphabet soup of organizations that were sponsored by various Arab states, primarily Syria and Iraq, and many of them had fundamentally incompatible political programs, if you will.

But the PLO served as the institution within which their differences were discussed and debated, and policies that enjoyed the consensus of these different and often rival organizations were formed. So it served an absolutely crucial purpose, and I think that's where the idea of bringing Hamas and Jihad into the PLO makes so much sense, because here again, you could make an argument that just as in the old days, between Arafat and George Habash, between the Fatah and the PFLP, you had fundamentally different and many would argue incompatible political programs, they nevertheless managed to work together for decades within a common institution for a common cause, and there's no reason why that shouldn't be possible in the form of the PLO with these Islamist movements. That's my first point, because you raise a lot of points, so I'm trying to recall them.

The second one to understand, as far as the Palestinian Authority is concerned, is that the Palestinian Authority was established by the PLO in 1994 as a subordinate administrative agency, territorially limited to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In other words, it was not a national Palestinian organization. Its jurisdiction, authority, whatever you want to call it, was limited to the 1967 occupied territories, and its sole purpose was to exercise those powers within those territories that were being transferred by the Israeli military government in the occupied territories to the PLO.

What happened, you pointed out to Arafat accepting Oslo, was basically a roll of the dice to resume relevance in the aftermath of the 1991 Kuwait crisis and the long crisis of the Palestinian national movement. The idea was that this would make the Palestinians once again a central player in the Middle East, and more importantly, that either Israel would see the light and would actively cooperate with the Palestinian leadership in implementing a two-state settlement, and if it did not, Israel's western backers in Washington and Europe would not allow this opportunity to be lost and would compel Israel to accept and implement a two-state settlement.

It was, of course, a fundamental, strategic, historic miscalculation because Israel had no intention of ending the occupation, and even more importantly, the West had even less inclination to make Israel end the occupation and establish an independent sovereign Palestinian state in the occupied territories.

But I'd just like to make a final point, which is that it's not as if Fatah and the PFLP and these other organizations existed in exile, and the two movements that did not have a presence in

exile, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Communist Party, only existed in the occupied homeland.

Yes, you know, until the 1980s, the Communist Party had a very limited presence in exile. It didn't join the PLO until 1987, and yes, the Muslim Brotherhood and later Hamas really only began to establish a presence of any sort in refugee camps in Lebanon and so on during the 1990s, but the PLO movements had always had cells and activists and members and so on among the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It is not as if people in these territories who wanted to join the PLO factions would leave, up sticks, leave and go to Jordan or later Lebanon.

Many, of course, did; but many remained, and it was really only after 1982 and the loss of its headquarters, its final headquarters in a state bordering occupied Palestine, its expulsion from Beirut in 1982, that the PLO movements, constituent factions, began much more actively investing in the development of grassroots civic organizations in the occupied territories. This was done by Khalil al-Wazir, Abu Jihad, perhaps more than any other Palestinian exile leader, and to a lesser extent also by other Palestinian movements. So yes, that is absolutely key to understanding the genesis and rapid spread of the first Intifada in December 1987.

You also asked about the State of Palestine. I think, again, to the best of my understanding, the State of Palestine does not have, let's say, a separate civil service or anything of the sort. The State of Palestine is, in essence, the expansion of the PLO, if you will.

It is the formal institutional presence of the Palestinian national movement at, for example, the United Nations and in various other regional and institutional situations.

[Helena Cobban]

Where they have ambassadors who are...

[Mouin Rabbani]

Yes. What used to be the PLO delegation to the United Nations is now the mission of the State of Palestine to the United Nations, similarly in the League of Arab States, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and so on. So it is not something that is, let's say, entirely separate from these other national institutions.

[Helena Cobban]

So many people say that if you want to get the kind of uniting for peace resolution at the General Assembly this year, which is going to be happening this month now that we're in September, that it should be very easy because the State of Palestine... Well, first of all, you have the emergency special session that has been in session for, what, 10 years? But it can be convened very quickly at a moment's notice.

And actually, it doesn't need to happen during a regular General Assembly session. But since everybody will be in New York, well, everybody apart from the Palestinians will be in New York. I don't know.

I mean, Riyadh Mansour presumably is there now and will stay. Who knows?

[Mouin Rabbani]

Well, if I can interrupt you, my understanding of Little Marco for a Big Israel's latest missive is that the U.S. will, in brazen violation of its 1947 headquarters agreement with the U.N., will deny visas to any PLO or PA official to travel to New York, but is exempting current members of the Palestinian mission to the U.N. from that decree.

[Helena Cobban]

Interesting. Interesting. So I think that happened once before. Was it in 1990?

[Mouin Rabbani]

December 1988.

[Helena Cobban]

1988. Yeah, right after the whole George Shultz, whatever, that actually Bill Quant was involved in brokering that. So at that point, the General Assembly voted to up sticks and move to Geneva, which was quite a powerful move, I suppose, although it didn't lead to anything immediate.

Is there a possibility they might do that this year? Or what are you seeing as realistic possibilities from this?

[Mouin Rabbani]

There's a possibility, but I consider it unlikely. You know, what happened in 1988 is, as you'll recall, on November 15th of that year, the Palestine National Council meeting in Algiers proclaimed the independent Palestinian state, that a number of Western governments are now almost 40 years later considering recognizing. And the PLO leader, Yasser Arafat, launched what was known as a peace offensive.

And he was coming to address the General Assembly of the United Nations in order to proclaim that the PLO accepted various U.N. resolutions that had been a requirement for acceptance by the U.S. And also that as a result of this proclamation, the PLO was seeking to establish a sovereign Palestinian state that would live in peace with and alongside Israel. And this, of course, presented a real threat to Israel, whose strategic objective was not partition, but annexation. And the U.S. dutifully rejected and in brazen violation, once again, of the headquarters agreement, dutifully refused Arafat a visa to come and address the General Assembly. The international community was so outraged that it took the decision to relocate that session of the General Assembly from U.N. headquarters in New York to U.N. headquarters in Geneva.

And Arafat, you know, who was, let's not forget, he was at the time also a global icon for third world liberation. He had invested years, if not decades, in building relations throughout the world. And so he gave that speech in Geneva to rapturous applause.

I think, you know, the world is a little different now. First of all, we're not talking about Yasser Arafat.

Again, regardless of what one may think of him, you know, he was one of the most recognizable faces on the planet. You know, the current Palestinian leader is someone, you know, one of his own aides once described him to me as flat as a pancake. And as I recently wrote, I thought that was an overly generous description.

He hasn't invested in these kinds of relationships. He, you know, his priorities seem to be not offending the Americans and keeping good relations with the Israelis, even though the Israelis are desperate to get rid of him. And he's, you know, he's going out of his way to avoid confrontation. So he will not be seeking to mobilize.

[Helena Cobban]

Avoid confrontation with them, but yes.

[Mouin Rabbani]

And he will not be seeking to mobilize the unprecedented global support that the Palestinians today have to relocate the session to Geneva or anywhere else. More importantly, I think many of these countries are now looking to Washington. And is it really worth getting another, you know, 50% tariffs just to hear Mahmoud Abbas talk about nothing?

So I, you know, again, it's, it's possible that, that the brazen nature of the US violations of its treaty obligations towards the United Nations will cause a groundswell of countries to, to conclude that, you know, we're absolutely not going to take this anymore. And we're moving the session to Geneva. But for a variety of reasons that have to do with their own relations with Washington and the weakness of Palestinian diplomacy, I think it's unlikely.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah. I have to say, I'm not sure. Well, I really, I don't think, you know, holding the general assembly in Geneva is a solution to anything.

You know, what's important is the content of any resolution that comes out. And you know, that we have the Hague Group that has taken some small steps toward boycott and divestment. And Turkey has apparently joined them in, you know, stopping arms shipments. There's a lot of mid-size states and South Africa that are really getting on board with this agenda to dissociate themselves in all ways possible from what Israel is doing. But in order to assemble the kind of the force at the General Assembly that can overcome or override the US veto, you need to have substantial states that are prepared to face down Washington on this. You know, it's been kind of interesting the past couple of days to see

the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in particular to see India there with Russia and China.

[Mouin Rabbani]

Modi got spanked by his idol in the White House. He's running to try to find new friends.

[Helena Cobban]

But we can't really rely on that as forming a counter to the US veto. So what should we realistically be asking for from this year's general assembly? That's my final question.

[Mouin Rabbani]

Well, you know, the main issue that's being discussed at the general assembly with respect to Palestine this year is whether this growing group of Western states, after holding out for nearly half a century, are finally prepared to recognize Palestinian statehood. I have to say it's not entirely clear that they will. They have said they intend to, they have put forward all kinds of conditions and so on.

But yes, recognition is symbolically important, but it is also practically meaningless if these states do absolutely nothing to make it meaningful. In other words, *at a time of intensifying genocide, at a time of intensifying annexation in the West Bank, at a time of intensifying lawlessness, are you simply going to say we recognize Palestine while continuing to provide arms to Israel, while continuing to make your markets available to illegal products from illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied territories? Are you going to maintain the whole network of research and economic and security and commercial relations with Israel?*

Well, if that's the plan, then recognition actually serves as a fig leaf for business as usual. It serves as camouflage rather than a meaningful policy change.

In this respect, an author recently writing for the Israeli magazine Plus 972, I unfortunately forget his name, said that if that's the case, we would do better to focus on these governments, not recognizing Palestinian statehood, but recognizing the apartheid character of the Israeli state.

That might be more useful. So the real question now is: There is a genocide in the Gaza Strip. Are you going to prioritize fulfilling your legal obligations under the Genocide Convention to do everything within your power to bring this to an end and to at least stop enabling it?

Or are you going to say "nothing to see here", but we recognize Palestine or even we are prepared to eventually recognize Palestine? So that I think is the key issue. What are you actually going to do to address the apocalyptic situation on the ground?

That's number one. And number two, if you do go ahead with recognition and Israel, as it is increasingly threatening, responds with an act of annexation, partial or whole, in the West Bank, what are you going to do next? I mean, Brussels specializes in drawing bright red lines that turn out to be green lights.

So if this time, the Israelis recently moved forward on the E1 settlement plan in the West Bank, which the Europeans for decades have been saying is a bright red line. Well, the Israelis have now crossed it and the Europeans pretended nothing happened. So if they now proceed to formal annexation, will that have any impact whatsoever on European-Israeli relations apart from even more intensive commercial and security relations?

We'll have to see, but I'm not holding my breath.

[Helena Cobban]

Well, on that really depressing note, thank you, Mouin, for talking through some of this issue with me. I hope we can talk again soon.

[Mouin Rabbani]

Thank you, Helena.

[Helena Cobban]

Always a pleasure to hear your thoughts.

[Mouin Rabbani]

Thank you.