

# The Arafat-Hamas Rapprochement

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## Brief Analysis

**H**amas's suicide bombing in Tel Aviv today follows a period of improved ties between that organization and the Palestinian Authority. Over the past month, Yasser Arafat has undertaken several steps to reach a rapprochement with his Islamist opponents through personal meetings with Hamas leaders, a "National Dialogue" on February 27 that included Hamas, and the release last week of Hamas's imprisoned senior military leader, Ibrahim Muqadmeh.

PA-Hamas relations: A milestone in the Hamas-PA rapprochement came during the Palestinian national dialogue in Nablus. The convocation was the first gathering of all Palestinian groups (except Islamic Jihad) since the beginning of the Oslo process almost four years ago. While the February 27 meeting was widely interpreted as a moderation of Hamas, subsequent events suggest that the basis of rapprochement may have come from Arafat's greater willingness to accommodate Hamas' positions in the peace process. In sharp contrast to Hamas's usual position of criticizing the PA for accommodating Israel, Hamas was generally supportive of the PA during and after the National Dialogue. Jamal Mansour of the Hamas delegation told the New York Times, "We are telling [the PA], 'We are supporting you, we are with you in fighting settlements and on the issue of Jerusalem.' We will give them advice, whatever they need." Gaza-based Hamas spokesman Mahmud Zahar—formerly imprisoned by the PA—said that Hamas is "fighting settlements and now you [the PA] are fighting settlements." Zahar added that Hamas and the PA are now part of a "higher committee in the West Bank and Gaza" that cooperates in "confront[ing]...settlement activity."

Elaborating on this new rapprochement, West Bank Hamas leader Hamil Hamami said, "We are concluding an unwritten agreement with the Palestinian National Authority to find the lowest common denominator so that we can live together." Zahar, too, denied that Hamas had given any ground, asserting that Israel's insistence on imposing unilateral decisions in the West Bank and East Jerusalem "is forcing [Arafat] to come back to his opponents and strengthen himself within Palestinian society."

A chronology of closer ties: On the eve of his trip to Washington in early March, Arafat met with Palestinian rejectionist groups and reportedly told them that there must be no terrorist attacks in the period leading up to Israel's first further redeployment from the West Bank (the dimensions of which were announced March 7). As reported in a front-page March 15 story in the pro-PA Jerusalem paper Al Quds, Arafat met upon his return on the night of March 9 and 10--in the wake of Israel's decision to build in Har Homa—with four representatives of Hamas's political wing. An Israeli paper (Yediot Aharonot) reported that when the meeting ended at dawn, "all the participants understood that Arafat was giving them a free rein to carry out attacks against Israel." There is circumstantial evidence to support this contention. Not only was the meeting followed by today's suicide attack, the first in a year, there has also been an escalation of attacks against Israelis for several days, including the stabbing of an Israeli soldier and two firings on Israeli patrols in Refah, Gaza. Meanwhile, one day after Hamas threatened on Tuesday to resume suicide bombings, Arafat's Fatah faction distributed a leaflet in the territories "urging a return to the path of struggle against the Zionist occupation using every available means." [Emphasis added]

> Arafat's release of Hamas's Ibrahim Muqadmeh was the most significant gesture of late. "This is a very disturbing development," said one senior U.S. official, speaking on the condition of anonymity in the New York Times, "because whatever its motivation, we're very concerned that it will send a signal to Hamas and others that they have the green light." (On the record, the U.S. denied Israeli charges that Arafat had given a "green light" for renewed terrorism.) According to a March 17 story in Yediot Aharonot, Arafat's Preventive Security Services as well as other parts of his security apparatus apparently opposed the move as well.

Questions of strategy: Yasser Arafat's contacts with Hamas raise the question of whether his commitment to negotiations is conditional or irrevocable. This is the same question that was raised during the September riots following the opening of the Hasmonean tunnel, when PA police used firearms in confronting Israeli troops. While the Washington summit last October and the January 15 Hebron accord were supposed to have closed the chapter on Palestinian reso-Hamas relationship suggests that the option may remain open. This takes on special urgency given that the process has not yet begun to address the most complicated and contentious issues in the negotiations—Jerusalem, settlements, refugees, borders, statehood—in "final status" talks.

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