

Fayad's New Government: Implications and Challenges

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May 22, 2009

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Brief Analysis

Just prior to his May 28 visit to Washington, Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas reappointed Dr. Salam Fayad as PA prime minister. Although Fayad headed an interim government since his resignation on March 7, his formal reappointment carries with it important changes to the composition of the government. Signaling the failure of Fatah and Hamas reconciliation efforts, the reshuffled cabinet also reflects Abbas and Fayad's desire to expand the government's base to include more Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) factions and independents. The success of the new government will depend to a large extent on how the Abbas-Fayad coalition addresses the challenges ahead -- especially within Fatah itself.

Expanding the Abbas-Fayad Base

Fayad's previous government was criticized for drawing ministers from a narrow political spectrum that included Fayad's Third Way faction, Fatah groups that fled Gaza following Hamas' June 2007 coup, and largely unknown independents. Hastily formed after the Hamas seizure of Gaza, the former government included only fourteen ministers, many of whom directed two ministries simultaneously. The cabinet's composition and makeshift/ nature limited its support among Fatah, independents, and other PLO factions, and led to increasing calls, especially within Fatah, to expand its scope.

The new government seems to have overcome these problems. Comprising twenty-two ministers, the new government includes ten Fatah ministers; one new minister each from the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Fida, and the Popular Struggle Front; and three new independents well known at the national level. The most prominent of these independents, Dr. Ali Jarbawi, a professor of political science at Birzeit University and the president of the Palestinian Central Election Committee, is the new minister of planning. Also reflecting Abbas-Fayad efforts to broaden the government's appeal, the new cabinet features two ministers who live in Gaza, although Hamas prevented them from leaving Gaza to attend the government's first meeting in Ramallah. Seven holdovers from the previous government retained their positions in the new government, among them Riad Malki as minister of foreign affairs.

With this lineup, Abbas and Fayad hope to gain broader public support, soften opposition within Fatah to Fayad, and create an alliance against their rivals, both in Hamas and within Fatah.

Failure of Unity Talks with Hamas

Despite Fayad's statement at his swearing-in that "the new government is a transitional [one] until the Palestinian factions reach an agreement in Cairo on a new government," the announcement of a new cabinet amounts to Abbas's recognition that reconciliation talks in Cairo have failed. Five rounds of talks between Fatah and Hamas since August 2008 produced limited progress on procedural issues such as holding presidential and legislative elections before January 2010. On the most pressing issues of the government program and control of the security forces, there has been no progress at all.

Fatah insisted that any new unity government must accept the Quartet conditions of recognizing Israel, respecting past agreements, and renouncing violence and terror. According to Muhammad Nazal, a Hamas leader in Syria, "the Fatah delegation wanted the government's recognition of Israel to be crystal clear." Hamas's position, however, remained unchanged, with its leaders vowing that "whatever the government's form, Hamas won't allow the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) to approve it if it accepts the Quartet conditions." Hamas's intransigence meant that discussion of this issue essentially stopped after the third round of talks in early April.

On the security issue, Fatah was adamant that future reforms be limited to Gaza, while Hamas insisted on changes in the West Bank. Hamas wants to end the mission of Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton, U.S. security coordinator for Israel and the PA, of rebuilding security forces in the West Bank, while Abbas seeks to expand the program to Gaza. In the last round of talks, Egypt proposed a joint force of 15,000 men from Hamas and Fatah under Cairo's supervision to impose law and order in Gaza, but Hamas agreed only to a joint force of 300 men to work at Rafah crossing. Majed Faraj, head of the military intelligence service, said, "[Hamas] wants to share with Fatah in ruling the West Bank, while it insists on ruling Gaza alone."

Abbas's Firm Stance against Hamas

Abbas wants to make clear before his planned May 28 meeting with President Barack Obama that he is fully committed to past agreements, especially the Roadmap. By reappointing Fayad, who enjoys considerable U.S. trust and confidence, Abbas is reiterating his commitment to improving PA security forces in the West Bank. Abbas wants his visit to focus on how the U.S. administration plans on convincing the Israeli government to accept negotiations based on the principle of two-state solution.

Abbas also believes that Fayad is the guarantor of continuing international aid to the PA that will sustain its security sector, civil administration, and economic reforms. Since international donors at Sharm al-Shaikh in March 2009 approved of Fayad's reconstruction plan for Gaza, Fayad's reappointment signals that their money will be allocated as previously planned.

The Challenges Ahead

According to public opinion polls, improved law and order in West Bank cities has somewhat boosted public support for the PA. Nonetheless, Abbas and Fayad face major challenges that are likely to limit support for the cabinet:

- A faction within Fatah headed by Ahmed Qurei and supported by most members of the Fatah Central Committee and the Fatah bloc in the PLC argues that a government headed by a non-Fatah personality will weaken the party's position in the PA institutions. They believe that Fayad, rather than Fatah, will get credit for any economic or security improvements. Abbas and Fayad have failed so far to reach a compromise with this stream in Fatah. Although Fayad appointed two ministers from this camp, both refused to participate in the new government. This faction within Fatah may try to orchestrate major protests against the new cabinet. Three major Fatah syndicates in PA institutions, including the powerful teachers and civil servants unions, have declared they will not deal with new ministers until there is an agreement with the Fatah PLC bloc.

- The Abbas-Fayad coalition also failed to convince the Palestinian Popular Front, the Palestinian People's Party, and the Palestinian National Initiative to join the new cabinet since they believe that forming the government before the end of talks with Hamas "will deepen the division among the Palestinians."
- Abbas and Fayad also have their own differences that they need to iron out. Credible reports said that delays in announcing the new government were driven by disagreements between the two on the important portfolios of Foreign Affairs and Interior.

Unfortunately, even if Abbas is able to overcome all of these obstacles, he is hardly out of the woods. The Palestinian elections are now scheduled for January 2010, and neither Abbas nor the United States has publicly articulated whether and how they plan to move forward if Hamas should once again emerge victorious. Developing a coherent and workable plan for these elections will undoubtedly be one of the main subjects of discussion between Abbas and Obama during Abbas's visit. Getting this right will be critical if there is to be progress in this troubled area.

Mohammad Yaghi is a Lafer international fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Palestinian politics. ❖

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