

The Price of a Palestinian Unity Government

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Fatah and Hamas are considering the reestablishment of a Palestinian unity government. Although many scenarios are possible -- ranging from a full division of ministries to a government filled with anonymous technocrats -- each option raises serious issues. Most likely, though, Hamas would emerge as the big winner, with Fatah's standing greatly damaged.

Why the Push for Unity?

A variety of reasons are causing the push for unity right now. First, in the aftermath of the Gaza Strip conflict earlier this year, Egypt has been applying significant pressure on both parties to reach an agreement. These efforts have included discussions on a cease-fire, opening the border to Gaza, and prisoner releases, as well as the Egyptian-hosted conference on Gaza's reconstruction. Cairo believes that ongoing Palestinian infighting creates a vacuum in Gaza, which could lead to more violence and more anxiety for Egypt.

Second, the annual Arab League summit will be convened later this month in Doha, Qatar, and the Palestinian issue is potentially divisive. Arab regimes have widely differing attitudes toward Hamas, as became readily apparent during the Gaza crisis, and Arab leaders will be pushing for common ground. This drive for unity puts massive pressure on Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas to accede to terms with Hamas.

Third, in return for captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, Israel is considering releasing up to 450 hard-core Hamas prisoners, some 300 of whom are serving life sentences for directing or participating in lethal attacks against civilians in recent years. If this occurs, the swap could provide Hamas a major windfall. If Israel helps tip the balance of Palestinian power in Hamas's favor, Abbas may have no choice but to preempt the move by dealing with Hamas himself.

Fourth, Israeli foreign minister and Kadima leader Tzipi Livni refused to join the new center-right government of Likud member Binyamin Netanyahu, saying that he is not committed to a two-state solution. This makes some Arabs question whether peace talks will be futile and the focus should be on internal Palestinian unity instead.

Finally, some Arabs hope the new Obama administration may be more supportive of a unity government than was the Bush administration, which actively opposed the earlier, Saudi-brokered unity government established by the Mecca Agreement in 2007.

What Sort of Unity?

On the table are four variations on a unity government: One involves full unity under the terms of the Mecca accord, in which Hamas and Fatah divide all the ministries between themselves -- essentially a "Mecca II." A second version would be a government of technocrats, whose political leanings and sympathies would be known to Hamas and Fatah, but who would be officially aligned with neither. Under this arrangement, which Hamas officials have opposed, the prime minister could be a Palestinian businessman. A third approach, which seems unlikely, would be to ask current Prime Minister Salam Fayad to remain premier, keep the security and finance portfolios in his hands, and divide the rest among other technocrats. A fourth possibility, also unlikely, is that the Hamas will enter a unity government having accepted the Quartet conditions.

Implications of Unity

It is clear that either a Mecca II agreement or a government of technocrats headed by an untested prime minister would create profound

challenges to U.S. Palestinian policy. For Hamas, either government would likely be a major victory and a possibly fatal blow to prospects for Palestinian coexistence with Israel. Key criteria need to be established to evaluate such a government.

Basis of the government. Could Hamas, which has refused the Quartet's 2006 principles -- recognizing Israel, accepting past agreements, and renouncing violence -- suddenly accept the very ideas it has repeatedly and vocally refused? This is doubtful, as Hamas leaders have steadily maintained that they want a unity agreement that allows for "resistance" or, in other words, violence. Both President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have made clear that they, like the Bush administration, would not deal with a Palestinian government that did not accept the Quartet conditions. Moreover, a Palestinian government committed to "resistance" could give the Netanyahu government a rationale not to engage in the peace process, allowing it to avoid international pressure on settlement expansion.

Security. It is hard to envision a Mecca II agreement that does not involve Hamas's integration into the security services. As one senior Palestinian said, it would be "suicidal" for the Palestinian Authority (PA) to allow this. Any government in which Fayad does not have control over security and finance could end the U.S. effort led by Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton to train Palestinian security officials. It would also end Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation, which has extended to a majority of West Bank cities. Fathi Hammad, a member of the Hamas leadership in Gaza, insists on the release of all Hamas prisoners held by the PA in the West Bank. An Israeli decision to release Hamas's maximum security prisoners would virtually guarantee that Abbas would be forced to follow suit.

Finance. Fayad is someone who is respected internationally for his commitment to government transparency and economic improvements in the West Bank. It was on this basis that the United States gave him \$300 million last year and that Secretary Clinton committed hundreds of millions more last week. According to Clinton, the U.S. Congress would not allow funding for a Palestinian government that does not accept the Quartet principles.

Gaza. Hamas has made clear that it will not permit Abbas to resume control of Gaza. Hamas sees its control of Gaza as nonnegotiable. Instead, it will only allow a symbolic PA presence at the Egypt-Gaza border as a cover for reconstruction. Moreover, a unity government is bound to increase direct Arab funding of Hamas. Funding from Qatar, which Palestinian cabinet officials say provides Hamas with \$20 million per month, will likely increase as a result. Iran's support will probably go up as well.

Fayad. Last Saturday, Fayad issued a letter of resignation. He remains as a caretaker but wants to ensure that he is not seen as the obstacle to a government of "national consensus." While Fayad may remain in this position, depending on how the situation plays out, he has clearly decided that it is unwise to make himself an issue during politically sensitive Fatah-Hamas negotiations.

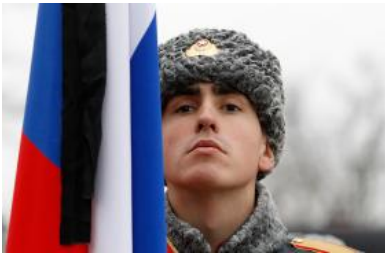
Conclusion

If a unity government is formed that accedes to Hamas's demands, the organization will be the big winner, and the losers will be Abbas, Fayad, and those favoring coexistence with Israel. If Hamas gains a share of power without accepting the Quartet principles, it would gain legitimacy without paying any price. As such, it will remain in firm control of Gaza, seek to control the funds for Gaza's reconstruction, be in a position to unravel Fayad's critical security and financial reforms, and ensure that prospects for peace remain bleak. The impending lopsided prisoner exchange with Israel will also bolster Hamas in the Palestinian camp -- at Abbas's expense.

For those who do not want Abbas forced into a losing position, the question is whether Washington will remain on the sidelines or make its views firmly known in Cairo, Ramallah, Riyadh, and Jerusalem. In a conspiracy-ridden Middle East, passivity will likely be interpreted as U.S. indifference to Abbas. Yet, beyond the importance of perception, the wrong type of unity could be a profound blow to U.S. interests in the region and beyond. The Obama administration has viewed the Middle East peace process as a key feature of its regional policy. Since a "wrong" type of unity will undercut Obama's Middle East policy, the U.S. government needs to be assertive now, not just critical after the fact.

David Makovsky is a Washington Institute senior fellow and director of the Institute's [Project on the Middle East Peace Process](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/template102.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchAreas) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/template102.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchAreas>) and coauthor with Dennis Ross of the forthcoming book *Myths, Illusions, and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East*. ❖

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