

How Long Can the Palestinian Unity Government Last?

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Brief Analysis

On March 18, the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) overwhelmingly approved a new unity government by a vote of 83 to 3. This lopsided result does not reflect the many internal and cross-factional tensions that will ultimately undercut the current Fatah-Hamas coalition. Within both factions, the center of gravity is shifting toward hardline elements that favor political confrontation over accommodation. As these elements continue to consolidate control, existing tensions between the rival parties will be exacerbated, affecting the future of the Palestinian unity government from within.

Fatah's Two Rival Camps

Since Hamas won the January 2006 legislative elections, Fatah has been divided between two blocs: one that favors the unity arrangement with Hamas and one that prefers confrontation.

Those who believe that a unity arrangement with Hamas will maximize Fatah's current authority include a loose coalition of imprisoned Tanzim leader Marwan Barghouti, his followers, and the old guard leaders of the Fatah Central Committee -- including Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala), Hani al-Hassan, Abbas Zaki, and Farouq Kaddoumi, the Tunis-based nominal head of Fatah and rival to President Mahmoud Abbas. Countering them are second-tier Fatah leaders who prefer that the party both remain an opposition movement and pressure Hamas to accept the conditions set down by the Quartet (the United States, Russia, the UN, and the European Union) for alleviating the political and economic boycott of the Palestinian Authority (PA). This faction is headed by Muhammad Dahlan and backed by many members of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, including Saeb Erekat, Nabil Amr, and Azzam al-Ahmad, as well as the leaders of the Preventive Security and intelligence services.

The Dahlan bloc eventually backed the unity agreement because Hamas's better-organized forces defeated Fatah during armed clashes in Gaza. Nevertheless, it views the accord as a temporary truce to be abandoned when Fatah regains confidence, strength, and resources. Toward this end, it seeks to undermine those who favor accommodating Hamas and has succeeded in doing so in several ways:

- Dahlan's stature within Fatah has grown in recent weeks. Abbas appointed him secretary of the National Security Council, empowering him to reform the security forces and strengthen the presidential guard.
- Fatah has improved its public outreach efforts by appointing two spokesmen -- Jamal Nazal in the West Bank and Abdul-Hakim Awad in Gaza -- to focus primarily on criticizing and exposing Hamas activities through media outlets

and popular websites.

- Four of Fatah's six ministers are Dahlan allies. They include Azzam al-Ahmad, who is also deputy prime minister; Minister of Transportation Sadi al-Krunz; Minister of Public Works Samih al-Abed; and Minister of Health Radwan al-Akhras. Moreover, some of Barghouti's traditional allies are joining Dahlan's camp in fear of Hamas ambitions to control the PA and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

- In early March, Abbas appointed Fatah leadership committees for the West Bank and Gaza. The former is headed by Hussein al-Sheikh, Dahlan's ally and Barghouti's archrival. It is still unclear what the mandate of these committees will be, but the appointment was clearly aimed at strengthening Dahlan's network at the expense of Barghouti's.

Dahlan and his allies may be improving their internal position within Fatah, but they continue to face significant obstacles and will have to remain unified if they are going to take over the party.

Meanwhile, the Fatah faction that hopes to accommodate Hamas is neither united nor well organized. Indeed, Barghouti's primary political objective -- holding a sixth Fatah conference to reform the party and elect new leadership -- is anathema to his Central Committee allies, who do not want to lose their positions. Although its authority is waning, the committee remains Fatah's primary leadership body and will have to be included in any decision to remake the party. In March, the committee appointed former prime minister Ahmed Qurei to head Fatah's recruitment and organization departments, most likely to counterweigh the leadership committees named by Abbas.

The Resurgence of Hamas Hardliners

In a speech delivered shortly after the formation of the unity government, former Hamas foreign minister Mahmoud al-Zahar signaled that hardliners within the group do not favor the terms of the Mecca accord. Using the phrase "we in Hamas" to suggest that his opinion represents that of Hamas's religious leadership in the Shura Council, al-Zahar countered three specific points of the unity government platform: (1) Hamas will not extend its ceasefire with Israel to the West Bank unless Israel withdraws completely from all lands occupied in 1967; (2) while Hamas would accept a Palestinian state with temporary borders -- since this does not require a peace agreement with Israel -- it refuses a permanent state within the 1967 borders, which would be equivalent to recognizing Israel; (3) Hamas opposes giving the PLO a mandate to negotiate with Israel until all Palestinian factions are represented in the organization, including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Al-Zahar's speech has several implications for the future of the unity government. First, it preserves Hamas's right to terminate the agreement if Fatah refuses to reform the PLO and incorporate Hamas into the PA's senior administration. Second, it indicates Hamas's independent position on truce terms with Israel. Third, it reflects Hamas leaders' concern that the military wing will shift loyalties to more extreme Islamist groups if it perceives its political leadership to be softening.

Over the past year, radical groups such as the previously unknown Swords of Islamic Righteousness have destroyed fifty-three internet cafes and several video stores and cultural centers in Gaza. Hamas cooperates publicly with some of these groups (e.g., the Islamic Army and Popular Resistance Committees), but its connection to other fundamentalist groups -- including the Islamic Swords -- is unclear. Hamas has never questioned the behavior of such groups, either because it has clandestine ties with them or because it benefits from their activities.

At its core, Hamas does not want to appear as if unity with Fatah has forced it to relinquish its goal of establishing an Islamic Palestinian state encompassing all of historic Palestine. For example, when the Mecca accord was announced, Osama bin-Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, accused Hamas of selling Palestine for a few seats in the unity government. Hamas responded with an official statement: "Palestine is an Islamic endowment. No one has

the right to abandon one inch of its soil, and Hamas holds firm to this principle."

Such hardline attitudes have been echoed in the various power shifts occurring within the organization. For example, former interior minister Saed Siyam was recently appointed head of the Hamas parliamentary bloc, replacing the coordinator of the months-long negotiations with Fatah. Siyam, who previously founded the Executive Force and played a significant role in the armed confrontations with Fatah, announced that the Shura Council was responsible for appointing him. If al-Zahar, Siyam, and other hardliners continue to gain authority within Hamas, it will be increasingly difficult for members of the pragmatist faction led by Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh to remain more than titular heads of the party.

Fault Lines in the Unity Government

There are three main areas in which Hamas aspires to expand its influence and ultimately replace Fatah, each representing one of Fatah's traditional sources of power: (1) the security forces, (2) the institutions of the PA, and (3) the PLO. Consequently, Fatah and Hamas will find implementing the Mecca accord -- and the related articles of the unity government platform -- to be nearly impossible.

Security forces. Consuming more than 25 percent of the PA's annual budget and comprising 58,000 official members, the security forces are the primary target of Hamas's efforts to take over the PA. Two major points of Fatah-Hamas contention are the mission and composition of these forces. Publicly, both factions claim that the forces should be neutral, nonpartisan, and tasked with enforcing the rule of law. Yet, they fundamentally disagree on how the forces should function in relation to Israel. Fatah believes that they should be responsible for implementing any agreements made with Israel, while Hamas wants them to be part of the military resistance. For example, on March 25, Hamas demanded that an Abbas advisor be prosecuted for treason after he advocated security coordination with Israel during an interview on Israeli radio.

Hamas has already succeeded in infiltrating many of the security forces. During the confrontations with Fatah, for example, the police and national security forces -- traditionally loyal to Fatah -- remained neutral, leaving only the presidential guard, Preventive Security, and general intelligence as active combatants against Hamas.

Differing views on how to refashion the security forces will likely cause significant tension between Fatah and Hamas, if not an outright breakdown of the unity agreement. The new government's platform calls for both factions to form "a higher national security council that represents the terms of reference to all security services" and "to restructure the security services, . . . build them on a professional basis, and reduce the partisan considerations." It is difficult to envision Fatah and Hamas agreeing to specific formulations of these principles. For example, finding a consensus choice for the post of interior minister proved to be the most difficult part of the unity negotiations -- after five weeks and twelve options, the final choice was Hani Kawasmeh, an accountant who previously served in various midlevel administrative capacities. A weak interior minister will only increase the probability of future factional struggles over the security forces.

PA institutions. In a report issued in March, the World Bank criticized the Hamas government for appointing 10,000 employees in 2007. Of these, 5,500 were in the security forces, 3,500 in the ministries of education and health, and 1,000 in senior positions across ministries. Hamas will seek to appoint more of its members in the public sector as it tries to usurp Fatah's dominance over the PA's institutions. For its part, Fatah will resist these efforts, both because it wants to employ its own members as a form of patronage and because the PA's budget is already overburdened with public sector employees. (Ironically, after it lost the 2006 elections, Fatah ignored a World Bank recommendation that it cut monthly salary responsibilities, instead inflating the payroll by adding thousands of employees.)

The Mecca accord stipulates that the senior PA positions, which Fatah dominates, be divided between the two parties. The PA's limited resources and the aspirations of both sides to gain positions for their followers will create

struggles over every appointment. Fatah's health minister has already dismissed numerous Hamas appointees to his ministry.

The future of the PLO. Hamas may have empowered Abbas to negotiate with Israel under the umbrella of the PLO, but it placed two significant checks on his authority. According to the unity government's platform, "any offer on any final agreement should be presented to the new Palestinian National Council for ratification or to hold a general referendum [for] the Palestinian people inside and abroad"; also required would be an unspecified "law that organizes this referendum." In other words, the legislative body of a refashioned PLO (where Hamas contends it should compose the majority) must endorse any agreement that Abbas reaches with Israel, either directly or through a popular referendum held not only in the PA but also among refugee populations in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and elsewhere.

As it consolidates its authority, Hamas aims to reform the PLO and its representative body within both the PA and the Palestinian diaspora. Numerous unanswered questions remain regarding the size, composition, and institutions of a refashioned PLO, and the parties are unlikely to agree on these issues anytime soon, since the PLO remains Fatah's primary source of authority following the January 2006 electoral defeat. Indeed, Fatah will drag out any negotiations as long as possible to avoid giving up control.

Conclusion

It is difficult to envision a stable, durable Palestinian unity government. If the hardline factions within each party continue to gain strength, differences between their leadership will become irreconcilable. Fatah hardliners seek to oust Hamas and restore their lost authority, while Hamas hardliners are uncompromising in their policies against Israel and Fatah. Under such conditions, the unity government is likely to fracture along three major fault lines: the mission and composition of the security forces, the distribution of PA offices, and the future of the PLO. Meanwhile, ongoing factional violence -- including frequent kidnappings and assassinations -- threatens to return the streets of Gaza to a state of war. In the end, the unity government is just a tactical truce -- to be undone when one party believes unity no longer serves its interests.

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