

# A Palestinian Grand Bargain: Abbas's Government, Hamas's Program

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Nov 15, 2006

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## Brief Analysis

**R**umors of a newly formed Palestinian unity government have been ubiquitous in recent weeks, yet Hamas and Fatah appear to be closer than ever to reaching an agreement. Their unity talks survived even the tragic killing of twenty Palestinian civilians on November 8 in Beit Hanun, an incident that would ordinarily derail such negotiations. Both Hamas and Fatah understand the severity of the current political crisis and recognize they must move beyond this impasse to avoid further civil violence.

The major hurdle that will determine the success or failure of a unity government is the extent to which it addresses the criteria established by the Quartet (the UN, European Union, United States, and Russia) for restoring direct aid to the Palestinian Authority (PA): “nonviolence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the Roadmap.” The international community is unlikely to accept a new government of technocrats and independents without a substantive move toward the Quartet’s three conditions. While Hamas seeks advance assurances that any compromise it makes will end the blockade against the PA, the Quartet is unlikely to make a judgment on any new government until after it is formed and produces a political program. Without the resolution of this inherent conflict, a final agreement on a unity government may remain untenable.

## Background

The formation of a unity government has been the only seriously pursued response to the international boycott of the Hamas-led PA. After the late June signing of the “Palestinian national accord,” also known as the “prisoner’s agreement,” forming a unity government became the central focus of Palestinian politics. Numerous intermediaries from Qatar to Egypt have tried to broker an agreement between Hamas and Fatah following months of factional violence and increasing disaffection between the parties. The most effective effort appears to be the homegrown initiative of civil society leaders pressuring both sides to assign key positions to technocrats and independents. Since mid-October, Mustafa Barghouti, the head of the Independent Palestine faction in parliament and leader of the

Palestinian National Initiative, has served as the chief broker between Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas. Now, former prime minister Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala) is in Gaza representing Fatah in the negotiations, signaling that Abbas is no longer willing to commit himself directly to talks unless he is certain of the outcome. Qurei's role also reflects Fatah's internal division over the pursuit of a unity government. Members of its "young guard" prefer that Abbas adopt a more confrontational posture toward Hamas by expanding his powers as president, dismissing the current government, and forcing Hamas to react to a replacement.

### The Compromise

Hamas officials are demanding five guarantees from Abbas before agreeing to the unity government: (1) the new government must be accepted by the Quartet, which will end the economic embargo; (2) an immediate dialogue to reform the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) must begin no later than February 2007; (3) Israel must free imprisoned Hamas cabinet members and legislators; (4) the executive force established in Gaza will continue to operate independently and officially as part of the Palestinian security forces; and (5) the new prime minister will accompany Abbas when traveling abroad.

Hamas would vacate the key positions of prime minister, foreign minister, and possibly interior minister, and would support replacements who are professionals acceptable to both sides as well as to the international community. Hamas's initial choice for prime minister—Basem Naim, the current health minister—was rejected by Fatah because of his direct party affiliation with Hamas. The new consensus candidate for prime minister is Muhammad Shbair, the longtime head of the Islamic University in Gaza, who has no official experience in politics. Shbair, who holds a doctorate in microbiology from the University of West Virginia, is known as an independent, though he clearly has good relations with Hamas, and his father, Abed Shbeir, was a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza. Ziad Abu Amr, an independent lawmaker from Gaza who benefited from Hamas's backing in the election, is thought to be the next foreign minister. He may be challenged by Fatah, however, which wants to retain the ministry for one of its loyalists. Salam Fayad, the former finance minister and current Third Way parliamentarian, may return to his previous role if Hamas will accept him. Who will fill the position of interior minister remains a critical question, with Fatah hoping to regain dominance over the security services and Hamas aspiring to greater influence over them. Hamas wants to prevent security coordination with Israel, to expand and legitimize its executive force, and to ensure that the security forces will not threaten it in the future. As a whole, the government will be composed of technocrats, nominated by the parties in proportion to their representation in the legislative council in order to reflect the results of the January legislative elections.

Nevertheless, speculation about the personalities most likely to compose a new government obscures the point that current negotiations are unlikely to yield substantive concessions from Hamas. There has been no progress toward the adoption of a political program that clarifies the group's stance on issues central to future Quartet support. For each of the three Quartet criteria, the current prisoner's agreement retains deliberate ambiguities that allow Hamas to hold on to its rejectionist ideology while claiming it has met international conditions.

### Future Prospects

Abbas appears to be more focused on the composition of the unity government than on requiring Hamas to endorse a political program that specifically addresses the Quartet's conditions. But the individual political views of future ministers will not substitute for the government's "commitment"—in the Quartet's wording—to nonviolence, recognition of Israel, and the acceptance of past diplomatic agreements. Therefore, direct assistance from the West will only be restored if Hamas allows a unity government to adopt positions it rejects as a movement—unless the Quartet softens its conditions. Absent Hamas's approval of an internationally acceptable program for the unity government, Abbas cannot credibly assure Hamas that the economic boycott will end. Without substantive concessions from Hamas, any assurances Abbas provides will create a false sense of unity and be a recipe for future

breakdown.

Hamas may favor a tactical retreat at this juncture in order to pursue its ultimate objective of taking over all institutions of Palestinian governance, including the presidency and the PLO. It may hope that conceding on the platform of a unity government will improve its public image by restoring civil order after weeks of bloody clashes with Fatah. Hamas may also believe that it will prove its good faith to the Palestinian public by sacrificing its positions of authority for the sake of the general welfare, placing the interests of the people over those of its individual leaders. However, Hamas will have great difficulty avoiding maximalist statements that reveal its true ideology and preferences. Recent examples include Hamas leader Khaled Mashal's remarks, aired on al-Aqsa radio in Gaza, in which he threatened to abduct more Israeli soldiers and criticized Abbas for opposing the firing of Qassam rockets into Israeli towns. Hamas's concessions on the formation of a unity government should not be interpreted as a fundamental transformation of the movement, but rather as a tactical adjustment in its ongoing efforts to dominate Palestinian politics.

One key theme of the unity negotiations has been the increasingly dominant role of Hamas's external leadership in the movement's decisions. As Mashal and the hardliners within Hamas continue to gain influence over the Palestinian political system, the power centers of Palestinian leadership are shifting from inside the territories to individuals in the diaspora who continue to reject a two-state solution. This trend can only be reversed if a moderate, internal leadership shows that it is capable of delivering increased security, freedom of movement, and economic gains to the Palestinian people.

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Policy #1164

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