

Palestinian National Unity:

Formalizing the Informal?

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Brief Analysis

In the aftermath of the horrific Hamas suicide bombing of a Jerusalem pizzeria on August 9, President Bush once again called on Palestinian Authority (PA) leader Yasir Arafat to take the necessary steps to end the violence. Inside the PA, however, there is little discussion about a cessation of violence. Instead, the principal topic of discussion in the PA today concerns the prospect that Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the leading nationalist opposition groups may join a Palestinian "government of national unity," formalizing the already close cooperation between these groups.

Same Trench

National unity has been a top priority for Palestinians since the violence started in October 2000. To reconcile inconsistencies between the stated goals of the PA (violence to liberate "1967 Palestine") and the Islamists (violence to liberate "all of Palestine"), Arafat has encouraged unity among the various political factions. As PA Secretary General Ahmed Abdel Rahman describes it, "We are in a state of war. This dictates that all the Palestinian forces rally around the banner of the intifada and the resistance." In this context, Hamas and PIJ have been careful to avoid confrontation with the PA, and for the most part, they have succeeded. Ten months into the violence, Hamas characterizes unity as "the most important consideration." On August 7, PIJ leader Ramadan Abdullah Shallah told Al Manar TV: "the entire Palestinian people are now in the same trench."

Palestinian factions did not arrive in the "same trench" by accident. In fact, national unity has been carefully cultivated and nurtured from day one of the violence by an organization called the National and Islamic Forces (Al Quwa al wataniyya wal Islamiyya). Communiqués issued by this group—typically signed by up to thirteen groups, the most prominent of which are: Fatah, Hamas, PIJ, the Popular and Democratic Fronts for the Liberation of Palestine, Fida, and Saiqa—started appearing in the Palestinian daily Al Hayat al Jadida in early October. Subsequently, this organization—and its decision making body the "Higher Follow-up Committee"—developed into the leading coordinating body of intifada activities. At the same time, West Bank Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti emerged as the group's spokesman. Communiqués issued by the National and Islamic Forces include schedules of up-coming events (i.e. demonstrations, funeral processions, days of rage), as well as the policies advocated by the organization.

These positions include the continuation of the armed intifada, a rejection of negotiations, the strengthening of national unity, and a call to execute "collaborators."

Operational Coordination

The organizational unity of the National and Islamic Forces has proven a political success. More significantly though, it has produced operational returns on the ground. In an unprecedented development, formerly adversarial Palestinian factions-particularly Hamas and Fatah-have started to cooperate in joint military operations against Israel. For example, on July 1, Hamas and the Popular Resistance Committees, comprised of Fatah members, claimed joint responsibility for a mortar attack on the Israeli town of Sderot and pledged future "fedayeen operations jointly carried out by Al Aqsa Martyrs Battalions [Fatah Tanzim] and Al Qassam Brigades [Hamas]." Weeks later, these groups claimed responsibility for another attack, this time against an Israeli military vehicle in the Jordan Valley. Subsequently, the groups promised to "increase their joint operations against occupation and settlers." Israeli authorities confirmed this inter-faction coordination via the body bags. An aborted bombing on July 13, during the Maccabiah games resulted in the deaths of a Tanzim member and a member of the PFLP. And on August 1, 2001, two Palestinians-one Fatah and one Hamas member-were killed near Jenin by Israeli forces en route to an attack.

The latest collaboration between Fatah and Hamas provides Arafat with another arrow in his quiver of plausible deniability that forces under his command are responsible for terrorism. At the same time, however, it presents the PA with some difficulties. In late July, members of the PA Security Forces in Gaza attacked a squad of Hamas and Fatah commandos returning from a joint operation against Israel, severely injuring some of the men. In response, these groups issued a statement warning: "may those who order that we be shot at know they will not escape the immediate punishment." Punishment was meted out the next day, when twenty armed men from Hamas and Fatah converged on the Gaza home of PA Military Intelligence head Musa Arafat, and opened fire. Property was destroyed, but no one was injured.

Toward a Formal National Unity?

The PA-opposition Gaza standoff, and the increasing frequency and ferocity of Israeli targeted killings led, in August, to mounting calls for the PA to formalize a government of national unity. PA Ministers and Security officials-such as Minister of International Cooperation Nabil Sha'ath and PA Preventative Security Head Muhammed Dahlan-confirmed ongoing discussions and the Arafat invitation to Hamas. And only last week, Marwan Barghouti publicly called for the formation of a unity government with the Islamists. Hamas and PIJ officials responded cautiously but positively to the suggestion. Responding to the calls, on August 7, the Palestinian Legislative Council convened by video-conference to discuss the idea. Later that week, Arafat established a ministerial-level committee to initiate an official dialogue between the PA and representatives of national and Islamic factions.

A formalized National Unity government is both an appealing and problematic prospect for Arafat and the PA. No doubt, closer PA-Hamas relations could prevent future recurrences of the Gaza clashes. Likewise, the participation of Hamas representatives as Ministers in Arafat's cabinet would lend credibility to the increasingly unpopular PA. At the same time, as with the rest of his ministers, Arafat could ignore the advice of any co-opted Hamas officials.

But Hamas participation would also come with a steep cost. According to the Hamas leadership, the price of Hamas joining the PA is an official PA commitment to "resisting occupation" and abandoning Oslo. At the end of the day, while the semi-official PA policy of promoting the violence might be consistent with that of the Islamists, it is unlikely that Arafat will at this point comply with the Hamas demand to publicly abdicate support for the negotiated solution mandated by Oslo. In a sense, Arafat's continued public acceptance of the Oslo framework provides the PA with international protection from an Israel freed of its own remaining Oslo constraints.

More than domestic considerations, Arafat's decision whether to formally unify with Hamas and the Islamic Jihad

will be based on external factors, primarily the anticipated response from the United States. In this context, Arafat may be concerned that were Hamas to join the PA, Washington would brand the PA as a terrorist entity. This would leave open the possibility that President Bush—like his father in 1990—would suspend U.S. dialogue with the PLO. Given this possibility, it is questionable whether Arafat would consider unity worth the cost.

As the PA and the National and Islamic Forces embark on their latest round of "national dialogue," Palestinian political factions are more unified than ever. "All that is required," according to Marwan Barghouti, "is to move from field unity to unity of Palestinian National political rhetoric." Despite the temptation to move in this direction, given the potential consequences, at least for now, the PA may have to settle for the status quo: a continuance of the longstanding national unity government of the street.

David Schenker is a research fellow at The Washington Institute.

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