Palestinians to form national unity government

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Last week, following months of negotiations, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of Fatah, announced that he would form a national unity government with Hamas.

Abbas hopes this will pave the way for the United States, the European Union and international aid organisations to end their crippling embargo of the Palestinian Authority (PA)—in place since Hamas defeated Fatah in elections last January—and for Israel to resume talks with the Palestinians.

The agreement was reached in the aftermath of the war in Lebanon, which was a debacle for Israel and the US. It was formulated under conditions where the US has firmly set its sights on conflict with Iran and Syria, and both the Israeli and Palestinian governments face rising social discontent.

Within the Palestinian territories, the prospect of a national unity government has been welcomed as a way of ending the factional infighting that has threatened to develop into full-scale civil war. At least 58 people have been killed in factional fights since Hamas's election and another four were killed on September 15.

While Hamas has confirmed the agreement, it is likely to take weeks to finalise and the details are as yet unclear. Whether it goes ahead at all and in what form depends upon Washington, which is opposed to what it sees as an intervention by the European powers in its own backyard.

It is expected that Abbas will ask Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniya to form the next government. This is to be made up of eight cabinet members from Hamas, four from Fatah and various independents, representatives of other political parties and "technocrats."

The agreement is based on the so-called Prisoners' Charter, issued last June, which was in turn based upon a proposal by the Arab League in 2002, to which Hamas had already agreed.

It backs a two-state solution to the conflict with Israel, thereby abrogating Hamas's charter, which calls for Israel's destruction and rules out peace negotiations. It also accepts the creation of a Palestinian state within the territories occupied by Israel since 1967, not in all of historic Palestine, and pledges to concentrate resistance to Israel within that area.

But while conceding most of the points on which it has differed from Fatah since its establishment, Hamas has refused to explicitly recognise Israel's right to exist and the legitimacy of its occupation of Palestinian territory.

The Bush administration and the Kadima-Labour coalition government have insisted on Hamas doing so and renouncing violence as the preconditions for ending the blockade and resuming talks.

To get round this, the agreement authorises the Palestinian Liberation Organisation represented by Abbas to negotiate on behalf of the Palestinians, subject to the approval of the Palestinian National Council, which represents Palestinians internationally. Both parties to the agreement hope that ceding negotiating power to Abbas will be accepted as a tacit recognition of Israel by Hamas.

The Israeli government made clear that it was not satisfied with the agreement. "We have to make sure that this is not an attempt to make the Hamas government look better when in practice they have no intention of living up to the conditions of the international community," said Amir Peretz, Israel's defence minister. The office of Ehud Olmert, the Israeli prime minister, refused to comment.

But the Olmert government is under enormous domestic pressure as a result of the political, military and economic repercussions of its disastrous war against Lebanon, a wave of corruption scandals, and its economic and social attacks on the Israeli working class.

Ha'aretz columnist Danny Rubinstein called for the government to recognise the PA government, while foreign minister Tzipi Livni held a meeting earlier this week with Abbas at the United Nations in New York.

The day after the agreement was announced an Israeli military court ordered the release of 21 Hamas legislators and cabinet ministers abducted last June in retaliation for the capture by Hamas militants of the Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit. The prosecution is appealing the decision, but it is being seen as the first step in an exchange of Palestinian prisoners for Shalit.

The European powers welcomed the agreement, which they have argued is necessary in order to ensure the stability of the Middle East in the aftermath of the Lebanon war.

Even British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who is as usual most supportive of US aggression in the region, calculates that it is unwise to launch hostilities against Iran and Syria while the Occupied Territories are still in turmoil.

He sought such an agreement on his recent three-day visit to Israel and Palestine where he had meetings with both Olmert and Abbas, even offering Hamas the face-saving formula that a government of national unity should be recognised provided the government as a whole, not just the party, recognised Israel, renounced violence and accepted the past interim peace deals. Furthermore, he pressed both the Israelis and the Palestinians to meet, without preconditions.

The other European powers have less interest in backing the US. They have responded to America's problems in Iraq and Lebanon by asserting themselves more independently in the Middle East, firstly by arguing for a diplomatic agreement with Iran and now by welcoming the Fatah-Hamas agreement.

France said that the formation of a Palestinian national unity government should lead to an end of the economic embargo. The French foreign minister, Philippe Douste-Blazy, said, "A Palestinian government of national unity ... should lead to a re-examination of the policies of the international community towards the Palestinian government in terms of aid and contacts."

The European Union warmly endorsed the agreement. The EU's Finnish presidency has called on member countries to welcome the government. Finnish foreign minister Erkki Tuomioja said that the move could provide an opportunity to restart the peace process. A statement drafted by the 25 European foreign ministers in Brussels called for the new government to be welcomed, but stopped short of committing the EU

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to ending the embargo. They will meet to discuss whether the aid embargo should continue.

The Italian foreign minister, Massimo D'Alema, went further, saying his colleagues had already agreed to back the new government.

At an international donors meeting in Stockholm last week, aid totalling $500 million was promised to the Palestinian territories. UN aid chief Jan Egeland told the conference that the Palestinians needed at least as much money as that promised to Lebanon the previous week.

One aid worker who had returned from Gaza 10 days earlier told the conference that malnutrition was high and many new mothers were unable to breastfeed their babies. The UN says that the Palestinian economy is on the verge of collapse. There has been a precipitous decline in per capita income: unemployment is 50 percent and two-thirds of families live beneath the poverty line. In Gaza nearly 80 percent of the people live in poverty.

The Europeans have been shocked by the chaos brought about by US recklessness in Iraq and Afghanistan and by the popularity enjoyed by Hezbollah due to its resistance to Israel. Their response indicates growing concern at the destabilisation of the Middle East, the threats against Iran and America's increasing control of the Mediterranean region, including North Africa.

However, they too are being pushed into exerting themselves as a military as well as a diplomatic force in the region in order to challenge US efforts to secure its undisputed hegemony. That is why Europe has combined calls for peace with the Palestinians with sending troops to Lebanon.

Iran and Syria, both of whom are anxious to reach some sort of accommodation with Washington, have also welcomed the prospect of a national unity government pledged to resume the peace process.

Former Iranian president Mohammad Khatemi, speaking in the US on a 12-day private speaking tour and the most senior Iranian politician to visit the US since 1979, stressed that his words reflected official policy. "I think Hamas itself, which has come to power today in a democratic process, is ready to live alongside Israel if its rights are met and it is dealt with like a democratic state and as the Palestinian government, and pressures are removed from Hamas," he said. "Of course, whatever Palestinians think is respected by us," he added.

Syria's foreign minister, Farouk al-Sharaa, after meeting former Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qureia, said that his country supports "an agreement among Palestinian factions on the basis of national principles." Syria hosts a number of exiled Palestinian leaders, including the Hamas politburo chief Khaled Meshaal.

The initial response of the White House was to pour cold water on the new government.

The US secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs, David Welch, said Washington would look closely at the new government's programme, but added, "To the extent that we understand it so far, it does not meet the standard."

State Department spokesman Sean McCormack insisted that nothing had changed. It was "not at all clear that the Palestinians have come to an agreement on a unity government," he said, warning that if the boycott were to be lifted, the Palestinians should "meet the conditions that are laid out for them."

Nevertheless, after meeting with other members of the Quartet, the EU, Russia and the UN, in New York on September 20, the US signed a joint statement welcoming "the efforts of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to form a government of national unity, in the hope that the platform of such a government would reflect Quartet principles and allow for early engagement."

While it did not commit to end the embargo on the PA, it did agree to allow humanitarian aid to be sent to the Palestinians via a temporary international mechanism bypassing the existing Hamas-led government and encouraged Israel to hand over some $500 million in tax and customs revenues it is withholding from the Palestinians.

The statement, endorsed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, mirrored an EU statement last week. Whilst the statement does not commit the Quartet to doing anything, the fact that the US went along with the EU reflects the weakening of its position following the debacles in Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan and puts pressure on Israel to reach some sort of accommodation with the PA.

Hamas has done a deal with Fatah just eight months after winning a landslide victory in the legislative elections last January. Its election victory was the product of the seething frustration and anger of millions of Palestinians over the ceaseless devastation and humiliations inflicted upon them by Israel, the refusal of Washington to rein in its regional quartermaster, Fatah's corruption and nepotism, and the ever increasing poverty in the Occupied Territories.

Israel welcomed the election of Hamas and used its designation by Washington as a terrorist organisation as a licence to secure its aims by brute force, arbitrarily redraw its borders and seize huge tracts of West Bank land behind its massive militarised wall.

Hamas has agreed to form a government with Fatah and champion a two states solution after Israel has made it absolutely clear that it will not tolerate even the most truncated and partial expression of Palestinian sovereignty. The efforts to starve the Palestinians into submission and the murderous campaign against Gaza and the West Bank that followed have exposed all talk of a "two state solution," "land for peace" and a "road map." The reality is one of a continued illegal Israeli occupation that leaves the Palestinians subject to military raids, assassinations, abductions, bombings, and curfews backed financially and politically by Washington.

All previous attempts by the Palestinians to lay the basis for resuming "peace talks" or negotiations with Israel have been deliberately sabotaged. It was Israel's killing of Palestinian civilians that prevented an agreement between Hamas and Fatah identical to that now endorsed, provoking reprisal attacks that provided the *casus belli* for the full-scale military attack on Gaza since June. The Olmert government is committed to unilaterally determining Israel's borders by annexing East Jerusalem and much of the West Bank.

Hamas never offered a viable alternative to Fatah. Its growth represented a retrograde response to the failure of the PLO's programme of secular nationalism. But Hamas too seeks only a share of power for those sections of the Palestinian and Arab bourgeoisie whose interests it represents.

The terrible situation facing the Palestinian people demonstrates the impossibility of realising their democratic and social aspirations on the basis of a national programme and under the leadership of the Palestinian bourgeoisie. All that has been achieved by decades of heroic struggle and sacrifice is the creation of heavily militarised ghettos completely at the mercy of Israel.

A progressive solution can only be found through the development of an independent political movement aimed at the creation of a United Socialist States of the Middle East. This would remove the artificial boundaries imposed by imperialism and enable the valuable resources of the region to benefit all its peoples.

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