

Hamas reaches agreement with Fatah

Jean Shaoul

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The Egyptian military junta, working secretly with Israel, has imposed a “reconciliation” agreement on Fatah and Hamas. The rival Palestinian factions control the West Bank and Gaza respectively.

By accepting the new arrangements, Hamas is signalling that it is ready to join Fatah in policing the Palestinians in collusion with Egypt and other Arab bourgeois regimes, provided that it is allowed to do so by Israel and its imperialist sponsors and allies.

The Islamists have been brought to the negotiating table in large measure by Israel’s economic blockade, imposed on Gaza more than 10 years ago to cripple the Hamas-led regime. With little electricity or water due to power cuts, people are forced to buy water at exorbitant prices. Conditions are wretched: nearly 50 percent are unemployed, more than 65 percent of Gazans live in poverty, 72 percent are food-insecure, and 80 percent are dependent on international aid.

The proposed settlement is part of a broader effort by Egypt to strengthen the Sunni Arab axis, which includes Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and neutralise Qatar, Turkey and Iran. It follows several previous attempts by Egypt to broker a national unity government, the last in 2014, which Israel scuppered by launching a war on Hamas.

Azzam Al-Ahmed, head of the Fatah delegation, and Saleh Alarury, representing Hamas, signed the agreement while praising Egypt’s role and welcoming the prospect of an end to the bitter divisions between the two factions. Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas said that the deal constituted “a declaration of the end to division and a return to national Palestinian unity.”

The agreement follows a series of failed moves by Hamas to break the ever-tightening siege imposed by Israel, with the collusion of Abbas. Egypt too has largely kept its border with Gaza closed, particularly following the seizure of power in 2013 by General

Abdul Fattah el-Sisi, who views Hamas as a politically hostile offshoot of the now-banned Muslim Brotherhood, whose government he overthrew. Cairo has destroyed the underground tunnels between Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula that provided an economic lifeline for the enclave.

In response, Hamas agreed earlier this year on a new charter, stressing its role as a national liberation movement but omitting any mention of the Muslim Brotherhood and effectively repudiating its links with it. Hamas’s officials also left Qatar in June, after the Saudi-led alliance imposed its embargo on the country, accusing it of supporting terrorism.

Last month, Hamas agreed to hand over civilian authority in Gaza to the West Bank government controlled by Abbas’ Fatah faction. Last week, Abbas’s prime minister, Rami Hamdallah, went to Gaza to hold a symbolic cabinet meeting.

Of particular significance was the presence at the Cairo talks of Palestinian millionaire and strongman Mohammed Dahlan, who serves as security adviser to the UAE’s crown prince, Shaykh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

The former PA security chief, who fought a civil war with Hamas in 2006, is widely viewed as an Israeli agent. Abbas expelled Dahlan from Fatah in 2011, alleging his involvement in corruption and the murder of PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat. With close ties to Israel and the US, Dahlan is their preferred candidate to succeed the 82-year old Abbas.

In the months leading up to the talks, both the UAE and Egypt pressed Hamas to accept a leadership position for Dahlan, sugared with a pledge by the UAE, which seems set to take over Qatar’s role as Hamas’ patron, of \$100 million for a power plant and other humanitarian aid.

These developments paved the way for talks at Egypt’s General Intelligence Services headquarters.

Hamas, coming under heavy pressure from Egypt, agreed:

* Fatah would take full control of the Gaza Strip by December via an interim unity government with Hamas, made up of “technocrats.”

* Abbas’ presidential guards would police Gaza’s border crossing with Egypt beginning November 1, under the supervision of the European Union border agency EUBAM.

* Gaza’s police forces would be restructured, with an additional 3,000 Fatah security officers joining the police.

* In return, Abbas would end the sanctions on fuel imposed by his government last spring, which cut Gaza’s electricity supplies to just two hours a day.

Egypt’s intelligence services will police the arrangements, in collaboration with Israel, which sent a delegation to Cairo while the talks were under way. This will enable Egypt to control the movement of Jihadi groups operating in the Sinai Peninsula into and out of Gaza.

According to the London-based *Sharq Al-Awsat*, Hamas also agreed to avoid any action that could trigger retaliation from Israel.

Palestinian leaders will meet again in Cairo next month to discuss the arrangements for presidential and legislative elections to be held within a year. If a deal is implemented, Abbas will visit Gaza for the first time since Hamas won the last legislative elections in 2006, on the basis of its opposition to Israel’s illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories.

Fatah refused to accept the vote, precipitating civil war between the two factions and the political uncoupling of the West Bank and Gaza.

Since then, hostility to Abbas and Fatah has only increased. By siding with Israel against Hamas at the expense of the Palestinians in Gaza, most notably during Israel’s murderous assaults on the strip in 2008-9, 2012 and 2014, Abbas lost any last semblance of political legitimacy. The PA’s security apparatus is widely hated for its increasingly draconian actions on behalf of Israel.

Hence, without any assurance that Fatah will win a majority in a future election, the PA will simply postpone elections yet again and allow some unelected “interim government,” effectively imposed by Egypt, the UAE and Israel, to continue.

Several thorny issues still outstanding could yet blow up the fragile agreement. These include the jobs of 40,000-50,000 Hamas government employees, hired after 2007; the integration of Hamas into the PA administration; and the disbanding of Hamas’s 25,000-strong armed forces and decommissioning of its weapons. This is one of the three conditions set by the Middle East Quartet (US, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations), along with Hamas recognizing Israel and accepting previous agreements between the PA and Israel.

El-Sisi has sought to use Hamas’ isolation and the appalling humanitarian crisis to resolve Egypt’s own political problems and prevent Islamist groups, including some affiliated to the Islamic State that are challenging his rule in the Sinai Peninsula, from seeking safe haven in Gaza.

He also fears that the continuation of Egypt’s blockade of Gaza could precipitate a new war between Israel and Hamas that would highlight his own role as Israel’s accomplice, under conditions where Egypt too is seething with discontent.

The response of the Palestinians in Gaza to the reconciliation deal was muted. A few hundred gathered in the main square, calling on the new government to provide jobs and end the humanitarian crisis.

Washington welcomed “efforts to create the conditions for the Palestinian Authority to fully assume its responsibilities in Gaza” as key to improving the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

Despite Israel’s covert involvement, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has played to his right-wing support base and publicly rejected the new arrangement, saying that Israel would not accept “bogus reconciliations” conducted “at the expense of our existence.” He demanded that the unity government disband Hamas’ military wing and insisted on Hamas cutting its ties to Iran.



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