

Hamas-Fatah Reconciliation: “Unity” Engineered by Israel

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Global Research, June 10, 2014

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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In the celebratory atmosphere last week as the Palestinian unity government was sworn in, ending a seven-year feud between Fatah and Hamas, it was easy to overlook who was absent.

Hamas had agreed to remain in the shadows to placate Washington, which is legally obligated to refuse aid to a government that includes a designated terrorist group. The new Palestinian cabinet looked little different from its predecessor; Hamas’ input was limited to three independents, all in low-level ministerial positions.

And because this transitional government is still operating within the confines of Israeli occupation, the three ministers from Gaza were refused permits to travel to the West Bank for the swearing-in ceremony on June 2.

The appointment of a temporary government of technocrats is likely to be the easiest phase of the reconciliation agreed in late April. The deal has endured so far – unlike earlier agreements – because Hamas, in even more desperate straits than its rival, Fatah, has capitulated.

For that reason, the United States and most of the world hurried to offer their blessing. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, on the other hand, made dire warnings about the “strengthening of terror” and okayed 3,300 settler homes to punish the Palestinians.

A far trickier stage is still to come: the Palestinian cabinet under President Mahmoud Abbas needs to oversee a bitterly contested national election between Fatah and Hamas expected early next year.

The elections are seen as vital. Palestinians have had no say in who rules them since 2006, when Hamas was victorious. A year later, after brief and vicious fighting, Hamas and Fatah created separate fiefdoms in Gaza and the West Bank. Both need to prove their legitimacy at the ballot box.

Should voting take place, and Hamas win again, the US and others can be expected to boycott the new government – withdrawing desperately needed aid – as they did back in 2006.

But far more likely, Israel will not allow the elections to take place.

Eight years ago, in the months prior to voting, Israel initiated a wave of arrests of Hamas leaders in an attempt to stymie the democratic process. Israel also hoped to block voting in

occupied East Jerusalem, which it considers part of its “eternal, indivisible” capital. But the White House – realising a ballot without Jerusalem would lack credibility – pressured Israel into grudging acquiescence.

Less well remembered is that Fatah quietly conspired with Israel to try to postpone the national vote. Fearing that Hamas would sweep the board, Fatah hoped to use Israeli intransigence in Jerusalem as the necessary pretext to delay the wider elections to a time more favourable to its candidates.

Netanyahu has already announced that he will not allow an election in East Jerusalem, as well as indicating that Hamas will be barred from running elsewhere. That is hardly surprising: Israel has spent the past eight years eradicating Hamas from Jerusalem by jailing its leaders or expelling them to the West Bank.

But Fatah’s behaviour in 2006 hints at an even bigger obstacle to consummating the reconciliation. The reality is that Hamas and Fatah have entered the process only out of mutual despair.

Hamas’ political and geographical isolation in Gaza has plumbed new depths since the Egyptian regime turned hostile. Blockaded on all sides, Hamas has seen its support erode as the enclave’s economic crisis has deepened. A deal with Fatah seems the only way to open the borders.

The credibility of Fatah and Abbas, meanwhile, has been steadily undermined by years of cooperation with Israel – all while the settlements have expanded – in the hope of extracting a concession on statehood. With little to show for it, Fatah is increasingly seen as Israel’s craven security contractor.

Abbas’ new strategy – creating a momentum towards statehood at the United Nations – requires that his government-in-waiting establish its democratic credentials, territorial integrity, and a national consensus behind the diplomatic option.

The priority for Netanyahu is not only to void the elections but to weaken the two sides’ commitment to unity by punishing them for their insolence. He can do so given Israel’s control over all aspects of Palestinian life.

Israel has begun not only with another glut of settlement building, but by declaring war on the Palestinian economy, refusing to accept shekel deposits from Palestinian banks, and by imposing collective daily blackouts on Palestinians for unpaid bills to Israel’s electricity company.

Abbas, now responsible for paying the salaries of tens of thousands of public employees in Gaza each month, will be even more vulnerable to Israeli threats to refuse to transfer tax and customs revenues. On Monday it was reported that Israel had also been lobbying foreign capitals to ensure the Palestinian president is held directly responsible for any rockets fired from Gaza.

Hamas faces a no less difficult period ahead. If it strays too far from Fatah’s dictates, it will be blamed for destroying the unity pact; but if it adheres too close to Fatah, it will lose its identity and risk being outflanked by more militant groups like Islamic Jihad.

Samah Sabawi, a political analyst, observed of the unity government: "What we need more than ministries and authorities is resistance and liberation." The unity government - whether of technocrats or elected officials - will still operate within the limitations imposed by Israel's occupation.

In fact, the unity government simply breathes new life into the illusion - created by the Oslo accords of two decades ago - that good governance by the Palestinian Authority can change the Palestinians' situation for the better. In practice, such governance has entailed submitting to Israel's security demands, a Palestinian obligation Abbas termed "sacred" last week.

As Sabawi suggests, an occupied people needs not better rubbish collection or street lighting but an effective strategy for resistance.

Palestinians will not benefit from a PA that polices the occupation simply because it becomes more "unified". Rather, their struggle to attain real freedom will grow that bit more daunting.

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

A version of this article first appeared in the National, Abu Dhabi.

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