

FACTSHEET: THE PALESTINIAN UNITY GOVERNMENT



On March 17, 2007, a new Palestinian government – the “Unity Government” – was sworn in. The new government’s cabinet is comprised of members of Palestine’s two main parties, Hamas and Fatah, as well as members of other independent parties. In parallel with its creation, the Unity Government issued a platform document which detailed its new positions. The international community, Canada included, was put in a position of deciding how it would relate to this newly formed government.

What led to the Creation of the Unity Government?

In a fair and calm election, Hamas was voted into power over the Palestinian Authority (PA) in January, 2006.¹ Despite a highly moderated election platform and a unilaterally held ceasefire on its part, Hamas’ roots in violent resistance to the Israeli occupation of Palestine caused alarm in Israel and its supporters in the West. Almost immediately upon Hamas’ formation of its government in March, 2006, Canada led much of the West in boycotting the new government. This slashing of voluntary international aid – about \$30 million per month – accounted for a loss of about 25 percent of the PA’s monthly revenue. Far worse, Israel unilaterally stopped customs tax transfers established under the Oslo Accords – about \$60 million per month – accounting for a loss of about 50 percent of the PA’s monthly revenue. Since that time, the PA has been unable to meet most of its expenses. E.g. the PA’s 160,000 public employees have been essentially unpaid since March, 2006.

Israel and its Western supporters insisted on three conditions for the restoration of funds: recognition of Israel; renunciation of violent resistance; and acceptance of previously negotiated accords. The suggestion by Western leaders that a Palestinian Unity government incorporating Mahmoud Abbas and Fatah might reopen the channels of aid to the PA led Hamas to start negotiating such an arrangement in mid-2006. Unity discussions began around an accord between Hamas and Fatah called the “Prisoners’ Document” and evolved through several false starts through August and September. Finally, with the help of Saudi diplomacy in Mecca in early February, 2007 the two parties reached a power-sharing accord.

Does the Unity Government satisfy the demands of Israel and others?

Yes and no. While the platform of the new government does not subserviently genuflect to Israeli demands, it does agree to meet Israel at least half way on almost all issues. For example, the new government pledges to “achieve national objectives through the resolutions of [Palestinian bodies...] and the resolutions of the Arab Summits, and shall respect the international resolutions and agreements signed by the PLO [i.e. Palestine Liberation Organization.]” Thus, the new government does acknowledge the peace accords signed by the PLO, thus satisfying one outstanding demand. Secondly, by citing its support for the Arab League Peace Plan (a.k.a. Saudi Peace Plan) which includes recognition of Israel and its borders, the new government implicitly states its recognition of Israel. While the new government reserves the right of Palestinians to defend themselves against the Israeli military occupation, it nevertheless commits to “consolidating calm and expanding it to a comprehensive reciprocal truce [with Israel.]” The new government also gives Mahmoud Abbas, president of the PA, the right to continue to negotiate on behalf of the government. Thus, the new government’s platform does address the “three demands” imposed on it, but in its own terms.²

What has been the international reception to the Unity Government?

Israeli rejection of the legitimacy of the new government was almost immediate. On March 17, Israeli leaders bashed the new Unity Government publicly,³ and on March 18th, the Israeli government formally rejected it.⁴ The US, for its part, didn’t even wait for the formation of the new government before declaring an extension of its boycott. Just a week after the conclusion of talks in Mecca in February, the

US announced to president Abbas that it would continue its sanctions against the PA because the new government “will not explicitly recognize the State of Israel.”⁵ The EU was more initially open to dialog with the new government, agreeing to monitor the words and actions of the new government, and to meet with non-Hamas ministers from the new government. By mid-April, however, after meeting with the new PA finance minister, the EU decided against reinstating aid to the PA government. Still, the EU agreed to maintain its alternative funding channel (the “Temporary International Mechanism”) and to maintain relations with non-Hamas members of the PA cabinet.⁶ For its part, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in March called the international community to back the new Unity Government.⁷

Refreshingly, Norway was one country that chose to re-establish political and economic relations with the Unity Government.⁸ Norway’s stance was based on its interest to see greater calm among Palestinian factions, and to encourage the new government to uphold and expand its commitments to moderation. While encouraging the nascent Unity Government in its reforms and commitments, Norway maintained a distinct reform message for Hamas as a political party. Norway’s foreign minister stated, “Norway calls on the international community to work constructively with the Palestinian Authorities. We particularly call on Israel to take a constructive approach to the Unity Government, for example by releasing withheld Palestinian revenues from taxes and fees and by increasing the freedom of movement for Palestinians.”

What are the paradoxes in the treatment of the Unity government?

Humanitarian conditions for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are at perhaps their lowest point in modern history. Between the Israeli military occupation, the Israeli Wall criss-crossing Palestinian territory, the expansion of Israeli colonies, and the recent international sanctions, conditions have never been worse.⁹ The Hamas government and the democracy it represents did not voluntarily renegotiate the terms of its governance: it was forced to. And forced submission and new levels of ambiguity in the Palestinian national leadership – especially with no appreciation or acknowledgement from Israel’s supporters – will likely spawn additional frustration and tension within Palestinian society. In fact, polls conducted after the formation of the Unity Government – and the international rejection of it – indicate that a majority (68%)¹⁰ of Palestinian citizens support the Unity Government, while rejecting the conditions imposed on it by the Quartet (52%).¹¹

In addition, as Beirut journalist Rami Khouri points out, the demands of the US and the EU (and Canada) may be reasonable and logical, “but they are made unreasonable and illogical by being unilaterally imposed on the Palestinians in a context of siege and starvation warfare.”¹² Israel, the occupier, imposes conditions on the Palestinians with the support of the US and much of the West. Under these conditions, reasonable demands become divisive dictates. As Khouri puts it, the Unity Government needs guarantees on what it would get by explicitly giving in to Israeli demands, “such as parallel Israeli compliance with international norms of reasonable conduct. This [would include] Israel’s uprooting rogue colonies..., stopping land expropriations, releasing jailed officials, and ending assassinations of Palestinian militants and civilians.” Khouri and others assert that diplomacy which does not impose equal expectations on all parties is a useless and tired exercise: “The only diplomatic process that will succeed has never been seriously attempted: a demand for equal and simultaneous concessions from Israelis and Palestinians on key issues of statehood, recognition, coexistence, and renunciation of violence.”

¹ See CJPME’s factsheet “Hamas and the 2006 Palestinian Elections” for more information

² Assad, Samer, *Another Opportunity for US Diplomacy? The Palestinian Unity Government*, March 18, 2007, Counterpunch

³ *Israel again rejects Palestinian unity government*, March 17, 2007, CBC News

⁴ *The State of Israel’s policy towards the Palestinian government*, March 18, 2007, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, www.mfa.gov.il

⁵ Bannoura, Saed, *US will boycott new Palestinian Unity Government*, February 15, 2007, IMEMC

⁶ *EU Says No to Aiding Palestinian Unity Government*, April 11, 2007, DW-World, <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,2439662,00.html>

⁷ Al-Mughrabi, Nidal, *Palestinian unity government takes office*, March 17, 2007, Reuters

⁸ *Norway normalises relations with Palestinian Unity Government*, March 17, 2007, Press Release, Norwegian government

⁹ See May, 2007 World Bank report on how Israeli restrictions on movement and access, among other things, have devastated the Palestinian economy

¹⁰ *Palestinians Confident on Unity Government*, March 27, 2007, Angus Reid Global Monitor

¹¹ *Palestinians Say No to Quartet Conditions*, March 30, 2007, Angus Reid Global Monitor

¹² Khouri, Rami, *Painful Deception in Palestine*, September 18, 2006, Daily Star