



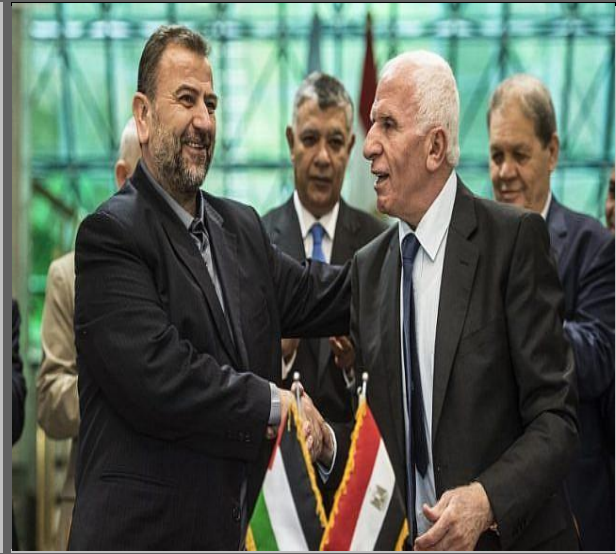
### HAMAS-FATAH RECONCILIATION DEAL 2017: RAISING HOPES

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



The rival Palestinian political parties, Hamas and Fatah, signed a reconciliation deal in Cairo on October 12, 2017 as part of an effort to end the decade-long rift between the two. The deal intermediated by Egypt has served to bridge a bitter gulf between the Western-backed Fatah party of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas, an Islamist movement designated as a terrorist group by Western countries and Israel.

The declaration came after representatives from Hamas and the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority (PA) convened in Cairo on October 10 to instrument a unity agreement that was signed in 2011, but never put into action.

The following points were agreed upon in the meeting:

1. The Palestinian Authority (PA) government will be empowered to carry out fully its responsibilities in administrating the Gaza Strip as it does in the West Bank by December 1.
2. A PA-formed committee will resolve the employees issue by February 1. The committee will work to resolve the employees issue and after the PA is enabled to carry out its administrative and financial powers in Gaza including tax collection, the PA will pay the Hamas-appointed employees their salaries.
3. Border crossings in Gaza with Israel and Egypt will be transferred to the PA by November 1.

4. PA security leaders will go to Gaza to discuss ways and mechanisms to rebuild the security services with relevant parties.
5. A meeting in Cairo will take place in the first week of December to evaluate the implementation of what was agreed between Hamas and Fatah.
6. All the Palestinian factions that signed the Cairo reconciliation agreement in 2011, will meet on November 14 in the Egyptian capital to discuss the 2011 agreement.

The Gaza-based Hamas movement decided in September that it would disband its administrative committee which governs the Gaza Strip. It also expressed its disposition to reconcile with the Palestinian Authority (PA). Subsequently, PA Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah visited Gaza and announced that the national unity government would start to assume its administrative responsibility of the Strip.

Hamas has been the de-facto ruler in the Gaza Strip since 2007 after the party defeated the Fatah party in parliamentary elections. Hamas then proceeded to push Fatah out of Gaza in a bloody conflict, when the latter refused to accept the result of the vote.

In the last few months, Hamas has been under heavy pressure by the PA's recent measures against Gaza, aimed at compelling Hamas to relinquish control of the Strip. Retributive measures included cutting the salaries of PA employees living in Gaza and scaling down the electricity supply to Gaza, which already suffers from a power shortage due to the Israeli blockade.

Egypt helped mediate several previous attempts to reconcile the two movements and form a power-sharing unity government in Gaza and the West Bank, where Abbas and the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority (PA) are based. Hamas and Fatah agreed in 2014 to form a national reconciliation government, but the deal soon dissipated in mutual indictments with Hamas continuing to dominate Gaza. Fatah representative Azzam al-Ahmad and Hamas' Salah al-Arouri said during their joint press conference<sup>1</sup> (of which there have been several) for example in 2011, 2014, and as far back as 2005. The latest talks are hence being treated with cautious optimism.

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<sup>1</sup> Michele Dunne Jake Wallis, "Have Hamas and Fatah Finally Reconciled?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/10/14/have-hamas-and-fatah-finally-reconciled-pub-73428>.

If successfully implemented, this deal could see the calamitous humanitarian situation in Gaza improve. The United Nations has warned that the coastal enclave may be unlivable by 2020.<sup>2</sup> Electricity is available for only a few hours a day. Barely one in 10 residents has access to safe drinking water through the public water network, and the United Nations projects that Gaza's aquifer may become unusable at the end of 2017.

The early conclusion of the talks in Cairo showcased how much pressure both sides were under to make progress. Afterwards, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas acclaimed what he called a "declaration of the end to division".<sup>3</sup> He is expected to visit Gaza within the next month for the first time since Hamas removed Fatah from the enclave in 2007.

However, the two sides reached only a partial agreement, addressing civil and administrative matters. Far more contentious issues such as national elections, reform of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the status of Hamas' armed wing, were set aside for deliberation at the next meeting in late November 2017.

Most importantly, agreement was reached on allowing security forces under Abbas' control to oversee the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt. That should encourage Egypt to end its closure of the crossing, allowing goods and people to pass through and easing the enclave's humanitarian crisis.

Meanwhile, the US administration is eager to see the talks succeed too. Primarily since it can be the ultimate way to sideline Hamas and simultaneously improve the chances for President Donald Trump to sell his long-promised deal for peace in the Middle East.

Hundreds of PA officials from the occupied West Bank have arrived in Gaza to start setting up a national consensus government. This administration of technocrats is intended as a provisional measure until Palestinian elections can be organized and a representative government installed. The issue of elections is expected to be dealt with in the next round of talks. However, it is hard to see how national elections will be conducted since it was Hamas' upset election victory 11 years ago that led to a civil war with Fatah in the first place - war that cemented Gaza's effective political and territorial separation from the West Bank.

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<sup>2</sup> "Gaza could become uninhabitable in less than five years due to ongoing 'de-development'— UN report," *UN News Center*, September 01, 2015, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=51770#.WeWfn8aZPBI>.

<sup>3</sup> Jack Khoury and Reuters, "Palestinian reconciliation signed in Cairo: Abbas hails historic end of division between Hamas, Fatah," *Haaretz.com*, October 12, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/1.816861>.

Equally troublesome is the question of how to integrate Hamas into the institutions of the PLO. Hamas has in the past insisted that in return for sharing the governance of Gaza with Fatah, it expects to have a stake in a reformed PLO. But including Hamas would undermine Abbas' diplomatic strategy of seeking Palestinian statehood since Israel and the international community could then easily withdraw their recognition of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, a card PLO has been cashing in. Furthermore, despite a recent avowal by Abbas that he would not accept a "Hezbollah model"<sup>4</sup> - a political movement with a separate militia and limited involvement in governance - in Gaza, that is what seems to be developing.

While thousands of Palestinians took to the streets across Gaza in celebration of the unity pact, despite the reconciliation, the accord was met with negativity in Israel which said that it would make peace "harder".<sup>5</sup> An Israeli government official on condition of anonymity said that the deal must abide by previous international agreements and terms set out by Middle East peace mediators, which include recognizing Israel and Hamas handing over its weapons."Israel will examine developments in the field and act accordingly,"<sup>6</sup> he said.

The Americans meanwhile, have given the reconciliation efforts their blessing. In a statement released during Hamdallah's Gaza trip, White House Special Representative Jason Greenblatt said the United States applauded "efforts to create the conditions for the Palestinian Authority to fully assume its responsibilities in Gaza".<sup>7</sup>

The larger question is: Will this deal succeed where others have failed?

It seems that the deal is more likely to stick than earlier ones, given Hamas's growing isolation and its realization of how hard Gaza - with its economy handicapped by border blockades and its infrastructure shattered by wars with Israel - is to govern and rebuild. Weary and disgruntled Palestinians would welcome reconciliation, seen as essential to strengthening their hand vis-a-vis Israel, as well as returning a semblance of normal life to battered Gaza.

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<sup>4</sup> "I will not accept the Hezbollah model in Palestine: Abbas," *Egypt Today*, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/2/25832/I-will-not-accept-the-Hezbollah-model-in-Palestine-Abbas>.

<sup>5</sup> "Palestinian factions Hamas and Fatah sign reconciliation deal," *ABC News*, October 12, 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-13/palestinian-rivals-fatah-hamas-sign-reconciliation-accord/9045694>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Oren Liebermann and Euan McKirdy, "Rival Palestinian factions announce reconciliation deal," *CNN*, October 12, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/12/middleeast/hamas-fatah-agreement/index.html>

Even though the tough issues are not yet on the table, the step by step approach taken by both sides provides a ray of hope. The real test of the agreement of course will be its implementation on the ground.