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THE NEW HAMAS GOVERNMENT**Amir Kulick****Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies**

Following the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections, the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), charged Hamas leader Ismail Haniya with the task of forming of a new government. Haniya initially tried to set up a Government of National Unity that would include Fatah, in the hope of neutralizing its opposition, but he was unable to overcome basic differences of principle. Abu Mazen also failed to persuade Hamas to draft policy guidelines that would meet the minimal demands of the international community (renunciation of terror, recognition of Israel and endorsement of previously-signed agreements with it). Nor did Abu Mazen invoke his authority to dissolve parliament. Instead, he contented himself with a laconic warning that he would use his power if the need arose before promising to provide "all assistance necessary" for the functioning of the new government.

That new government took office at the end of March. It consists of 24 ministers, seventeen of whom are Hamas activists (the other seven are independents). Eighteen of them are aged between 40 and 50 and all have higher education (twelve have PhDs). Five were previously implicated in terrorist activity and belonged to the Izz e-din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas. Most of the ministers have also

been imprisoned by Israel at one time or another. All in all, these ministers allow Hamas to present to the public a young, energetic government with a technocratic character, untainted by corruption and, most importantly, ostensibly capable of implementing the reforms that Hamas promised its voters. In addition to the new faces, however, the government also includes a hard core of Hamas veterans: Haniya, himself, as Prime Minister; Mahmoud az-Zahar, leader of the hard-line faction, as Foreign Minister; and Said Siam as Minister of Interior and Internal Security. These individuals will set the course of government decisions in keeping with overall policy determined by the senior Hamas leadership in the territories and in Damascus.

The new government's priorities were made clear in Haniya's inaugural speech. Apart from continuing to "confront the occupation" in all its aspects, they include the implementation of comprehensive reforms in order to deal with domestic anarchy and corruption and the reorganization of the structure of government ("putting the Palestinian house in order"). Thus, the government, if its declared plans are any indication, will focus on improving the lives of ordinary citizens, and in his speech, Haniya promised his audience "real accomplishments" as soon as possible. These priorities also largely dictate the division of labor between the


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president and the government: the former will manage foreign policy while the latter will deal with domestic affairs. Indeed, immediately after his government was sworn in, Haniya declared: "If Abu Mazen wants to move in any direction, the government has no problem with that," though he added the condition that "the results of an initiative or **negotiations** [my emphasis] must be presented to the Palestinian people." In other words, Israel will now confront a two-headed government, of which one half enjoys international legitimacy. This may allow Hamas to evade international demands and solidify its rule without conceding any of its principles (non-recognition of Israel, acceptance of previous agreements only to the extent that Hamas believes they serve Palestinian interests, continued use of violence).

On domestic issues, Palestinian expectations of the new government are high. That reality, along with the need to deliver the goods quickly, may well influence Hamas' behavior in the next few months vis-à-vis other Palestinian factors as well as Israel and the international community. Above all, Hamas needs a period peace and quiet to consolidate its rule and begin fulfilling some of its promises. It will therefore probably try to reach an understanding with other factions in order to rein in domestic violence and reduce terrorism directed against Israel. For example, confining attacks to "legitimate" targets (settlers and military targets in the West Bank) would serve Hamas' interest to persist in "armed struggle" while simultaneously habituating the world to Hamas rule and eventually securing its acceptance.

Some form of broader legitimization is vital if Hamas is to deliver on its promises to the voters, given the PA's dependence on external support. After all, the hopes it placed in "Arab and Islamic strategic depth" have not yet materialized, and the Arab Summit recently held in Khartoum not only failed to provide

substantial financial assistance; it did not even allow Hamas to participate in its proceedings. That leaves only the west.

But the combination of high domestic expectations and dependence on the west is likely to confront Hamas with a difficult choice: either flexibility with regard to negotiations with Israel and other western demands or failure to deliver on promises to the public. On the other hand, if Hamas does face a situation of "violate your principles or fail," the consequences could be painful for others, as well, because in such circumstances, the movement might decide to ignore established Palestinian "rules of the game" (by subverting any chance to form a different government or hold new elections) and opt, instead, for a renewed campaign of unrestrained terror. Given the organizational disarray of Fatah and the personal weakness of Abu Mazen, no other force is likely to emerge in the foreseeable future that could rescue the Palestinians (and, to some extent, Israel) from that scenario of chaos.

Alternatively, if international demands from Hamas are eroded and replaced by hesitancy and equivocation, which Hamas hopes will indeed soon happen, then the movement may well solidify its rule and fulfill its domestic obligations without having to make any changes at all. Given these unappealing alternatives, it would not be surprising if a "third way" is sought that would maintain international solidarity with respect to conditionality of financial support but at the same time sketch out a political horizon for contact and negotiation with Israel (according to some agreed formula). Such an approach might allow Hamas to bridge the gap between its principles and reality and perhaps push it along a different path.

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