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The Palestinian Unity Government

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The Palestinian unity government was sworn in on June 2, 2014 in Ramallah on the basis of a presidential decree by President Mahmoud Abbas, after Fatah and Hamas came to an agreement on the makeup of the cabinet. Although this is a government of technocrats whose ministers are not official representatives of Fatah or Hamas, most of them, including Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah, who was also the previous prime minister, and his deputies, are affiliated with Fatah. Hamas was forced out of weakness to accept the reconciliation agreement in its current form, and this was reflected in the terms of the agreement and the makeup of the cabinet. Thus, for example, former Foreign Minister Riad Malki remained in his post, despite Hamas opposition during preliminary discussions. Hamas was also forced to concede on the Interior Ministry portfolio, and for the first time to agree to the presence of Palestinian Authority (PA) forces in the Gaza Strip. In addition, Abbas and the new Prime Minister made it clear that the unity government is committed to the three conditions of the Quartet – opposition to violence, acceptance of existing agreements, and recognition of Israel – as well as security cooperation with Israel. The main achievement for Hamas in the negotiations on the government is the preservation of an independent military force in the Gaza Strip (along with retention of the Ministry of Prisoner Affairs and without a minister from the PLO, which is what Abbas wanted), even though security responsibility is transferred to the unity government.

Implementation of the reconciliation agreement, which includes elections in approximately six months for the presidency and the Palestinian Council (the PA parliament), along with the incorporation of Hamas into the PLO, was made possible by Hamas's distress following the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt. The change of government in Egypt had serious political, financial/economic, and military ramifications for Hamas. The organization had cooled its relations with Iran and Hizbollah, members of the axis of resistance (also known as the Shiite axis), and cut off ties with Syria under pressure from the Sunni Muslim "street," and subsequently also lost its main Egyptian base of political support. This likewise had grave financial/economic consequences, since Egypt controls the main access route to the Gaza Strip through Sinai and the tunnels on the Egyptian border. The el-Sisi government in Egypt has adopted a tough policy, with a blockade of Gaza, attacks on Hamas, and an effort to weaken it, including by blocking the tunnels. Hamas has thereby lost

its main source of income, and the economic crisis in Gaza has cost Hamas in terms of public support. Others in the region that still support Hamas, such as Qatar and Turkey and non-governmental actors, are also having difficulty transferring aid money because of the blocked smuggling routes. It has also become difficult to smuggle arms into Gaza, and Hamas has been forced to make do with locally produced weapons. These developments have created a situation in which civilian control of the Gaza Strip, and in particular, the direct, sole responsibility for the welfare of the residents, has become a considerable burden for Hamas. Its inability to pay salaries and guarantee a reasonable economic situation and suitable services for the population has only hurt it. For Abbas and Fatah, however, the failure of the negotiations brokered by US Secretary of State John Kerry has removed the threat that progress toward reconciliation will lead to the failure of the talks with Israel. In any case, the result was that the stronger party in the last phase of the reconciliation talks was Fatah, and that Hamas was forced to yield on most points. In the current round, what was most important to Hamas was that the government in Ramallah take responsibility for paying the salaries in Gaza and ensuring provision of services.

The desire to avoid damage to relations with the international community in general and the United States in particular played a key role in the drafting of the agreement. As the government of technocrats does not include members of Hamas, it was able to accept the Quartet's three conditions and preempt any drive to boycott it and stop the flow of aid money. Abbas also made sure to receive a commitment from the Arab League nations to compensate for any cut in funding to the PA.

Moreover, the unity government was established in political circumstances that are favorable to the Palestinians. The negotiations with Israel have been frozen, and in the international discourse, blame for their failure has been placed primarily on Israel and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In addition, international actors prefer to see the positive side of Palestinian reconciliation. They argue that first, Palestinian unity is essential if the goal is to reach a workable permanent agreement, and second, the new government is committed to the conditions of the Quartet. They might also argue that while the new government is supported by Hamas, which does not accept these conditions, the situation is worse in Israel, since the government of Israel includes a party that rejects a two-state solution and negotiations that will lead to its implementation. Consequently, establishment of the Palestinian national unity government has led to sweeping international recognition, including from the United States, the European Union, and the main EU member states. Russia, China, and India, which the Israeli government has presented as diplomatic alternatives to the West, have also recognized the new Palestinian government.

The government of Israel, which strongly opposes Palestinian reconciliation and the national unity government, has no real tools to cope with the Palestinian move. It is hard pressed to use the effective means at its disposal, namely, stopping the transfer of tax monies it collects for the Palestinians, since the Arab states would compensate the PA, and if they did not, the PA might collapse. This would also hurt Israel, which would be responsible for services to

the Palestinian population, and in any case, would be attacked by the international community. Israel has resorted to punitive measures perceived as petty directed at PA officials, particularly revocation of VIP privileges. Israel will also prevent Palestinian ministers from traveling between the two areas and prevent participation by Hamas officials in sessions of the Palestinian Council. In addition, Israel could sabotage the elections, and in particular, interfere with Hamas's participation. However, as a result of this policy Israel is liable to be perceived in the region and around the world as an irrelevant actor on this matter.

It is difficult to estimate the life span of the reconciliation or the national unity government, and there are still many obstacles to implementation of the agreement. The parties chose to circumvent the obstacles by postponing negotiations on them until after the establishment of the national unity government. For example, Hamas hopes that the elections will restore it to legitimate rule, but Abbas has already decided to change the electoral law and institute fully proportional elections, which would not allow Hamas to achieve an absolute majority. Fatah is not enthusiastic about bringing Hamas into the PLO and will seek to undermine this clause. Each party is still seeking to hurt and gain the advantage over the other through the agreement, and when one of the two realizes that it is at a disadvantage, the chances are good that it will torpedo the agreement.

Caution in implementing punitive measures against the PA makes it possible for Israel to consider changes in its policy that would make it a more relevant actor. It cannot stop the international tide, but it can adopt the policy of the US administration, which is to judge the new government by its actions. If the policy of the new government toward Israel is a continuation of the policy of the previous government – and in particular, acts consistently to block attempts to rebuild the terrorist infrastructure and stop acts of terrorism in the West Bank – then Israel should have normal relations with it. Israel should even attempt to resume an effective political process based on a combination of different channels: negotiations for a permanent agreement, transitional understandings and agreements, and even unilateral measures that would preferably be coordinated with the Palestinians to some degree. If the Palestinian government does not act as it has pledged, then Israel could justifiably take practical steps against it and denounce it, while demanding international support for this policy. It is better for Israel not to use the reconciliation agreement as an excuse for continuing the status quo, which is harmful to Israel and exacts an increasing cost. Thus perhaps the reconciliation agreement is a blessing in disguise and might serve as the basis for a broader agreement among the Palestinians and in Israel on real steps toward progress on a two-state solution.

