

Hamastan vs Fatah-Land
A Chance for Mideast Progress?
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Muriel Asseburg of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs wrote in her commentary that the international community should avoid deepening the Hamas-Fatah split in order to achieve peace.

Since mid-June, there have been two governments in the Palestinian territories. While the Gaza Strip is controlled by Hamas, the West Bank is ruled by an emergency government under Salam Fayyad in cooperation with the President and Fatah chairman, Mahmoud Abbas.

Israel and the international community have interpreted the split as a chance. Thus, the Islamists in the Gaza Strip could be more easily isolated and the emergency government in the West Bank could be a partner for the resumption of cooperation, economic development and a diplomatic process. "Flourishing landscapes" and new freedom of movement in the West Bank would convince the Palestinian population of Fatah being the right choice for the future.

But the "Hamastan vs Fatah-Land"-approach is hugely unrealistic.

Israel has announced a gradual release of customs duties and value-added tax revenues collected on behalf of the Palestinian Authority and worth some \$700 million that it has withheld since the establishment of the Hamas-led government in March 2006. It has also promised to lift a few roadblocks in the West Bank, dismantle some settlement outposts and allow weapon deliveries such as armoured vehicles to strengthen Fatah.

But all these measures are far from sufficient to trigger a new dynamic and to tangibly improve the situation in the West Bank: As long as the system of roadblocks and permits remains in place, the Palestinian economy will not see a sustainable recovery.

An approach that pins hopes on a military confrontation between Fatah and Hamas will not stabilize the situation either. Instead, it carries the danger of a renewed flare-up of internal Palestinian fighting and its escalation into a civil war.

Also, increasing the pressure on the population in the Gaza Strip is hardly possible without causing a humanitarian catastrophe. The official unemployment rate in the region is already at some 35 percent, the poverty rate at above 75 percent. Around two thirds of the population depend on international aid deliveries. The danger of economic isolation then is to radicalize the Gaza Strip's population and to increase the attraction of Salafist and Jihadist groups – which, in contrast to Hamas, neither have a national agenda nor an interest in stabilization.

The new-old approach of the international community is contributing to making the vision of a two-state settlement increasingly unrealistic. This is because it sacrifices the creation of functioning and democratic Palestinian institutions in favour of short-term stability. And because it does nothing to prevent the ever greater erosion of a contiguous territory for a Palestinian state – which is a result of the separation barrier, the expansion of settlements and the corresponding transportation network in the West Bank.

German and European policies should therefore concentrate on averting a humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip and on creating conditions for an economic revival both there and in the West Bank. They should avoid undermining reconciliation among Palestinian factions, support improved governance of Palestinian institutions and take serious steps to achieve a two-state settlement in cooperation with the Middle East Quartet and the Arab peace initiative.

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