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Palestinian National Unity Government

An Opportunity to Revive the Peace Process

The European Union should take the chance offered by the new government to end the isolation of the Palestinian Authority and get the peace process back on the right track, comments Muriel Asseburg

On 15 March 2007, the Palestinian prime minister Ismail Haniyeh presented a national unity government, which was confirmed in office by the Palestinian parliament on 17 March. Its program is based on the agreement between Fatah and Hamas mediated by the Saudi royal family in Mecca.

The past months in the Palestinian territories have been dominated by increasingly violent conflicts between Hamas and Fatah.

Since Hamas entered government in March 2006, the Palestinians have also suffered under the international - or more precisely - western and Israeli isolation policy, which deprived the PA of its financial basis and incurred a dramatic deterioration in the humanitarian situation. Hamas was unable to maintain effective law and order.

Following several failed attempts at mediation by regional parties (particularly on the part of Egypt and Syria), the Saudi king managed to secure an agreement between Fatah and Hamas. In the Mecca Agreement of 8 February 2007, the two sides reached a settlement choosing dialogue and partnership as the means of inner-Palestinian debate in future, rather than violence.

A national unity government was to be formed in the weeks to come. Hamas is also to become part of the PLO – the only legitimate representative body for all Palestinians – and will be represented appropriately on its committees.

Mecca agreement and government program

Both the Mecca agreement and the new coalition government's program only refer to the Palestinian government's submission to the Middle East Quartet's conditions for resuming cooperation indirectly – recognition of Israel's right to existence and the previous agreements between Israel and the PLO, and a general renunciation of violence.

The government program, however, does state that the unity government is based on the resolutions of the "Palestinian National Council", on the Palestinian basic law, the national conciliation document, the resolutions of the Arab League and the treaties and agreements signed by the PLO.

The greatest success of the Mecca agreement is that it has initially halted the internal bloodshed (to a great extent), though it has not yet fulfilled international expectations.

But a Palestinian coalition government could hardly be expected to submit to the quartet's criteria explicitly. Hamas may well be prepared to recognise Israel's factual existence and work towards a ruling on the basis of the borders of 1967, but it is not willing to recognise Israel's moral legitimacy.

Nevertheless, the government program is a good starting point. Through the documents referred to in the text, the government is obliged to adhere to the Oslo framework (PLO agreement), a two-state solution (resolutions of the "Palestinian National Council", particularly the 1988 declaration of independence) and the conditional recognition of Israel (according to the Arab League's 2002 peace initiative).

The program states that the president of the PLO/PA is responsible for negotiations with Israel and any outcomes of negotiations are to be put to a referendum or a vote in the PLO's National Council. It also contains the offer of implementing a full bilateral ceasefire and speeding up the release of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

In principle, the grand coalition, incorporating Hamas and Fatah with the Third Way, DFLP, PPP and al-Mubadara, has good chances for putting its policies into action effectively, with a broad basis of support in the Palestinian population.

But it is by no means certain that the power-sharing arrangement will be a success. In the light of

the coalition partners' differing ideas on politics and society, it faces many tough challenges.

The most difficult of all is likely to be integrating Hamas into the PLO and reforming its organisation, reconciling the grassroots members after the armed conflicts and disarming the militia or integrating them into the security services.

Challenges for the reactivated Middle East Quartet

The quartet should regard the new government as an opportunity for re-opening the dialogue and cooperation with the PA, and as a starting point for mediation attempts between Israel and the Palestinians.

The EU should take the lead in the process and – as the Palestinian government's program extensively reflects the principles of the quartet – end the diplomatic isolation and restart its cooperation with the PA, in line with the European Council's decision of December 2006.

The focus of the decision on the extent of the cooperation should be the question of actual non-violence – the Palestinian government's efforts to achieve and effectively implement a full ceasefire. However, this will not succeed unless Israel also holds by the ceasefire.

The only way to prevent a further erosion of the PA's structures and thus also the influence of jihadist elements is cooperation with the Palestinian government, to ensure sustainable improvements in the socioeconomic situation and re-open peace negotiations.

Excluding Hamas from any cooperation will not help strengthen the Palestinian president and moderate elements, as the EU hopes to do. Nor is the White House's plan to build up the presidential guard's armaments a suitable measure.

Future prospects

Instead, there are two points that would strengthen President Abbas' legitimacy and thereby his position within the new government:

Firstly, the improvement of governance: Europe should offer a form of support not oriented along political opportunities but aiming for transparency, democratic procedures, and checks and balances.

These measures include uniting the security forces under the aegis of the Interior Ministry, disarming the militia from all parties, the return to a regulated budgeting process – with cash flows via the Finance Ministry under parliamentary supervision – and a clear division of competencies between the president and the prime minister.

However, Fatah also requires an internal reform process, making the movement into a capable and attractive political force.

Secondly, the re-entry into a peace process combining specific trust-building steps (extending the ceasefire, release of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners, re-starting the transfer payments under the "Paris Protocol", implementing the agreement on movement and access of November 2005, a stop to settlements, etc.) with a "political horizon" – an agreement sketching out a final status in the form of a goal map.

Ultimately, such an approach will not work without the USA, and Europe must engage in hard persuasion. The US secretary of state is a likely partner for the EU, as she herself propagates a "political horizon". On no account, though, should the EU let the USA block this chance for a new start, against better judgement.

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