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Hamas's Victory: From Gaza to Mecca

By [Mohammad Yaghi](#)

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As recently as December, Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas refused to back a proposal for a unity government offered by Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) member and head of the Independent Palestine list Mustafa Barghouti. That deal was based on the concept of a technocratic compromise under which Hamas officials would not have held the prime ministership or led any ministries. Yet under the terms of the February 8 Mecca accord, the current prime minister, Hamas's Ismail Haniyeh, will stay on as head of the next government, and the only portfolios Hamas members specifically will not hold are the finance, foreign affairs, and interior ministries, which will be headed by independents acceptable to both sides. The key question then is why Fatah settled for a unity agreement in February that provided it far less gains than previous unity proposals rejected by Abbas.

Fatah's Scare

While the Mecca accord may be interpreted as a mutual effort between Hamas and Fatah to stop intra-Palestinian violence in Gaza, a closer examination of the most recent clashes suggests that Hamas came away the winner and Fatah had to sue for peace.

Fighting between Fatah and Hamas reached an unprecedented level of intensity after a roadside bomb killed two members of Hamas's Executive Force in Jabalya on January 25. Since that incident, most of the clashes pitted Hamas's Executive Force, and Izzadin al-Qassam Brigades against Fatah's Preventive Security Organization, Presidential Guards, General Intelligence Service forces, and elements of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades associated with Fatah leader and legislative council member Momammed Dahlan. For the most part, the national security forces -- the police -- avoided the confrontations and attempted to remain neutral, fearing revenge killings to their families or because Hamas had already penetrated their ranks.

Fatah's forces suffered from internal divisions and rivalries among their leaderships. Despite a public reconciliation between Dahlan and his primary Fatah adversary in Gaza, Ahmed Hilis, forces loyal to Hilis did not join the fighting. Similarly, loyalists to Ashraf Joma, a Fatah PLC member from Rafah, avoided the confrontations with Hamas, signaling that these leaders prefer not to be identified as part of Dahlan's camp in Fatah.

Fatah also remained divided about whether to respond to Hamas provocations in Gaza with attacks against Hamas in the West Bank. In an early February meeting of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, Tawfiq Tirawi, head of the General Intelligence Service, criticized former Preventive Security chief Jibril Rajoub for playing the Red Cross between Fatah and Hamas rather than standing firm with Fatah against Hamas.

Unable to unite its forces under a coherent leadership, Fatah suffered greatly during the fighting after January 25. Most of the combatants killed during the fighting belonged to the Presidential Guards, the General Intelligence Service, or the Preventive Security Organization. Hamas forces succeeded in capturing and in some cases destroying several of the local headquarters of these organizations, in some cases killing colonels and commanders in addition to ordinary soldiers.

For the members of Fatah engaged in the fighting, the intervention of Saudi King Abdullah came at an opportune moment that surely prevented additional losses on the ground. The composition of the delegation Abbas took to Saudi Arabia was revealing. The group included many of the most prominent Fatah leaders who had initially pushed for confronting Hamas and opposed concessions for unity in the past, such as Dahlan, Samir Mashrawi, and Rawhi Fatouh from Gaza and Azzam al-Ahmed and Nabil Amr from the West Bank. It is unlikely that this group would have accepted a unity agreement with Hamas were it not for the substantial losses suffered by Fatah in the fighting since January 25.

Comprehensive Gains for Hamas

Fatah's defeats on the ground enabled Hamas to score most of the gains from the Mecca accord. Hamas succeeded in not explicitly accepting the Quartet's conditions for lifting international economic isolation of the PA. The letter appointing Haniyeh as the head of the new government simply mandates that the government "respect the Arab and international legitimacy resolutions and agreements signed by the PLO." Had the agreement included the word "accept" instead of "respect," or had it even specified which resolutions it referred to, Abbas and Fatah could have claimed that Hamas had shifted its position. Instead, Hamas had to modify none of its political program to reach the unity agreement -- as indicated by subsequent statements from its spokesmen that Hamas will never recognize Israel.

Beyond retaining its political program unchanged, Hamas advanced many components of its long-term strategy of wresting control of the PA and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Fatah.

First, the agreement secures the official incorporation of Hamas's Executive Force into the Palestinian security services whose salaries will be paid by the PA's Finance Ministry. Further, Hamas will have greater influence over the remaining security forces with the inclusion of Haniyeh and the Hamas-nominated interior minister in the Palestinian National Security Council.

Second, Hamas and its independent allies will formally control twelve ministries, including education, information, labor, and local government. Hamas's majority in the cabinet and its continued control of the PLC will allow Hamas to enact its administrative program, including any decisions to create positions for Hamas loyalists in the PA bureaucracy. A followup committee on political partnership is currently working to divide the highest PA administrative positions previously monopolized by Fatah such that Hamas members will become governors and ambassadors in the coming months. Consequently, the PA will no longer support Fatah's patronage system exclusively; it will soon begin paying expenses Hamas had previously covered with its own budget.

Third, another committee will formalize Hamas's long-sought objective of reforming the PLO and incorporating Hamas's leadership into the body that remains the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. A key part of the agreement will include the establishment of a new Palestinian National Council -- the legislative umbrella of the PLO -- through elections where possible, and by agreement in refugee populations outside the PA.

Fourth, Hamas used the talks in Mecca to advance relations with the Saudis, having previously rebuffed efforts by Egypt and Qatar to broker unity arrangements. The reported Saudi pledge of \$1 billion of assistance to the unity government suggests that Hamas achieved its objective of breaking the PA's international isolation by turning to the oil-rich Arab Gulf countries for support. If the Quartet (the United States, European Union, Russia, and the UN) continues to withhold aid to the PA, Hamas will claim that the international community opposes all Palestinian parties, including Fatah and the independents represented in the new government, not just Hamas.

In return for all these gains, the only visible concessions Hamas made for the cause of unity were to accept Salam Fayyad as finance minister after previously opposing him, allowing Abbas to veto the Hamas nominee for interior minister, and accepting the creation of a new Fatah deputy prime minister.

Conclusion

Several final details of the Mecca accord have yet to be formalized regarding the precise apportionment of ministries and administrative positions, so it will be premature to view the deal as final until the new government is seated.

As it stands, the agreement spells significant gains for Hamas politically, institutionally, bureaucratically, and in its relations with the Arab world. It is likely that Abbas and Hamas together will still attempt to use the Mecca accord as a means of alleviating the Quartet's sanctions by claiming the government has accepted its conditions -- even if Hamas as a party retains its core political ideology. Speaking in Cairo on February 11, Abbas declared, "Those who are not part of the government can say whatever they like, but those who are part of the government must respect the commissioning letter."

The Mecca accord will not end the struggle between Fatah and Hamas to dominate the Palestinian political system, but it does represent an effort to gain a respite from the violence by dividing the PA according to each faction's current position on the ground.

Mohammad Yaghi is a Lafer international fellow with The Washington Institute and a columnist for the Palestinian daily al-Ayyam.

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