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**HAMAS AND THE PALESTINIAN UNITY GOVERNMENT:
BETWEEN THE EXIGENCIES OF GOVERNMENT AND IDEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES**

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The recently-established Palestinian national unity government did not stem from a broad social and political consensus between Hamas and Fatah. Rather, it was the product of a common interest between the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen), and the Hamas leadership (both in Damascus and within the PA), who feared that Palestinian society was heading towards civil war and anarchy, and thus acted to bring a halt to the escalation of intra-Palestinian violence. The result was the Mecca Agreement of February 9, 2007, which served as the basis for the unity government's platform. Its fundamental guidelines included an indirect recognition of Israel, via "respect" (*ihitiram*) for past agreements between the PLO and Israel, as distinct from "commitment" (*iltizam*) to them; a willingness to establish a Palestinian state within the June 4, 1967 borders (i.e. the West Bank, including Arab Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip) within the context of a political agreement; insistence on the right of return of Palestinians to their lands and properties; a ceasefire with Israel in the Gaza Strip and a commitment to expand it to the West Bank, on the basis of reciprocity; and an emphasis on the legitimacy of resistance to occupation, in accordance with international law. Hamas retained the main social portfolios in the government, including Education, Labor and Economy, in addition to the Ministries of Religious Affairs and Communications. Hamas also promised to continue its efforts in the *da'wa* field (promoting religion), which includes the activities of charitable organizations, mosques

and community centers, institutions which serve as the core of the movement's efforts to promote a return to Islamic values and widen its influence in society. In return, Hamas agreed to give up control of three important ministries: Treasury, Foreign Affairs and Interior, and to placing the treasury and foreign ministries in the hands of individuals acceptable to the West.

Hamas' altered position constituted a significant move by the external leadership in Damascus towards the position of Hamas officials within the PA. Over the last year, the latter had demanded that Hamas adopt a more realistic policy which would pave the way to stabilizing its rule and enable it to begin rehabilitating the PA's governing institutions, society and the economy. The external leadership, on the other hand, had advocated the continuation of the armed struggle and not submitting to the international boycott, believing that this would enhance public support for Hamas. At the same time, the Hamas leadership was well aware of the supreme national importance that Abu Mazen attributed to the need to halting Israel's unilateral measures regarding the conflict, and thus preventing it from determining its borders on its own. Were Israel to succeed in doing so, went Abu Mazen's thinking, the chances of achieving a two-state solution that would also be acceptable to the majority of the Palestinian public would be sabotaged.

Since the establishment of the unity government, Abu Mazen has sought to achieve its recognition by the Quartet (the US, the EU, Russia and the UN), even if Hamas only indirectly recognizes

Israel's right to exist. His objective is to mobilize the international community's support, and that of the so-called Arab Quartet (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the UAE), in order to force Israel to accept the Arab peace initiative. In doing so, Abu Mazen is attempting to take advantage of the American and Israeli interest in renewing the peace process. Hence, he joined hands with the Saudis, linking the Mecca agreement and the founding of the unity government to the Arab peace initiative, which Arafat had originally accepted in March 2002. Saudi Crown Prince (now King) Abdallah's efforts at formulating the initiative had been welcomed at the time by the UN Security Council (Resolution 1397), and it was also mentioned favorably in the Road Map alongside Resolutions 242 and 338 as a basis for a future settlement.

According to this initiative, peace and normal relations would be established between Israel and the Arab states; the latter would proclaim an end to the conflict in return for Israel's withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 borders and the acceptance of a just and agreed-upon solution to the refugee question in accordance with UN Resolution 194.

In this way, Abu Mazen would pose to both Israel and Hamas the challenge of a peace agreement and the establishment of normal relations, in return for the end to the occupation and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with permanent and recognized boundaries.

For its part, the Hamas leadership has now been compelled to maneuver between (a) the obligation of governing, which require it to tender pragmatic policies in both foreign and domestic affairs, and (b) its determination to avoid returning to the slippery slope of the Oslo process, which led to the PLO's incorporation within the PA and focused the Palestinian problem exclusively on the West Bank and Gaza regions. The exigencies of governing and the sense of responsibility for preserving national unity, preventing civil war and reestablishing orderly government all led the Hamas leadership, however unwillingly, down the road towards compromise. It was forced to look the existing reality in the eye, and acknowledge the international legitimacy of the resolutions which underpinned the Oslo process; accept the collective Arab legitimacy, evidenced by its assent to the Arab peace initiative; and recognize the authority of Abu Mazen, as Chairman of the

PLO, particularly his right to renew negotiations with Israel for achieving a political settlement. On the other hand, the path of compromise required the movement's leadership to stubbornly defend its principles, most importantly the right of return of Palestinian refugees, and the claim to represent all portions of the Palestinian people. It is in this context that one should view Hamas' intention of gaining control of the PLO and restoring it to its past stature as representative of the entire Palestinian people, including those in the diaspora and the refugees.

Hence, the Hamas leadership promised to impose important restrictions in the negotiations with Israel that would ensure no deviation from its principles. Those restrictions are anchored in the text of the founding principles of the unity government, according to which the negotiations will be based on the principles embodied in the Palestine National Council's declarations of November 1988; the "document of national understanding" (based on the "prisoners' document"); and relevant UN resolutions, particularly those that are deemed to guarantee the right of return. Additional limitations include both the stipulation that any political agreement must be approved by the Palestinian people, including those in the diaspora, and the recent reconfirmation of the Arab peace initiative by the Riyadh Arab Summit resolutions (March 2007), which rejected the settlement of refugees in their current place of residence (*tawtin*).

The Hamas leadership thus reconciled the contradiction between its stand on immediate pressing issues, contained in the commitment to a continuing ceasefire and an open willingness to countenance a political settlement, and its goal of returning the interests of the Palestinian diaspora and refugees to the center of the official Palestinian position. The leadership's relinquishment of government ministries and modification of its political positions without conditions or guaranteed benefits exposed it to public criticism. At the same time, in its more practical approach, Hamas aspires to inscribe in the consciousness of the international community and Arab states that Hamas is a legitimate political movement, one which is prepared to accept a political settlement based on the principle of a two-state solution. To a certain extent, it has already succeeded in doing so.