



The Next Palestinian Government – An Address or a Fig Leaf

Following Hamas' victory, Ismail Haniyeh announced that "Hamas government may include Palestinian experts residing abroad" (**Ha'aretz**, 2/1/06). Before heading to Egypt, Mahmoud A-Zahar and Khaled Mash'al stressed that Hamas will establish a "Palestinian national unity government" (**Al-Hayat**, 2/6/06).

Re'ut claims that the nature of the next Palestinian government will affect Israel's political flexibility.

What is the Issue?

- *In principle*, Hamas can establish a government without forming a coalition with Fatah, and assume full power, authority and responsibility over the political, military and economic arenas.
- *However*, since its victory, Hamas keeps raising ideas based on division of authorities with Fatah:
 - **Establishing a "technocrats' government"**, comprising of personas not affiliated with Hamas.
 - **National unity government** including members of Fatah and independent MPs.
 - **PLO as the political address** – powers and authorities over the political process will remain within the PLO, which is under Fatah control.

Why is this Important? Why Now?

Why does Hamas refuse to establish a narrow government?

- **Maintain influence, avoid responsibility** – Hamas' strategy has been to influence the political process through terror, while avoiding responsibility for its actions. Responsibility was deflected onto the Fatah-controlled PA.
- **PA and Fatah as Hamas' political shield** – During Oslo, it was difficult for Israel and the international community to exert direct political pressure on Hamas, for fear of compromising Palestinian "autonomy".
- Following Hamas' victory, Israel and the international community should hold it responsible for Gaza and the West Bank.
- This responsibility will confront Hamas with the tension between its ideology, *on one hand*, and the political reality created by agreements between Israel and the Palestinians, *on the other hand*.
- Furthermore, due to its victory, Hamas will need to incorporate the PA bureaucracy, which is still, at large, under Fatah control.
- Therefore, Hamas is trying to stall in order to prevent Israel and the international community from exerting direct political pressure. Therefore, it attempts to renew Fatah's "protective shield" through a national unity government, a technocrat government, or by recognizing the PLO as responsible for the political process with Israel.
- Such strategy may be endorsed by Fatah, which aspires to maintain power, and by the international community wishing to prevent a crisis between Israel and the Palestinians.

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Policy Options

Israel is re-evaluating its policy towards the PLO and the PA, as well as towards Hamas and Fatah. Previously, Fatah controlled both the PLO and the PA. Now, Hamas has control over the PA while Fatah maintains control of the PLO. Therefore, following the elections, Israel faces two options:

a. **The address is PLO under Fatah -**

- The essence of this alternative is preserving the current structure of the political process with the Palestinians, established in Oslo. It is based on the PLO being the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.
- Such policy would allow Israel and the international community to avoid immediate crisis vis-à-vis the Palestinians
- *However*, this alternative has two main drawbacks:
 - It would allow Hamas to obscure the tension between its ideological principles and the political reality, which necessitates recognition, even if implicit, in agreements signed with Israel. Therefore, this option **obstructs exerting effective pressure on Hamas**.
 - PLO is not a real "address" as it does not have the capacity to reach an agreements with Israel without Hamas consent.

b. **The address is PA under Hamas**

- The essence of this alternative is aspiring for clarity regarding the identity of the Palestinian interlocutor. Hence, Israel will insist that the PA is the sole legitimate representative of the residents of Gaza and the West Bank.
- This alternative assures consistency between the election results and Hamas' powers, authority and responsibility regarding Gaza and the West Bank. It would prevent Hamas from continuing along the lines of its previous strategy: maintaining influence while avoiding responsibility.
- According to this logic, Israel should not allow Hamas to "hide" behind national unity government or technocrat government, and must insist that decisions regarding the political process will be affirmed by the Palestinian Legislative Council of the PA *and not* by the PLO, as stipulated in the existing agreements.
- This alternative also entails **switching the interlocutor from the PLO to the PA** through a set of measures taken unilaterally or coordinated with third-parties.

For additional sources see the Re'ut Institute website: www.reut-institute.org:

- About Hamas strategy, see: "[Can Hamas Continue to Enjoy Both Worlds?](#)" (5/24/05); "[Hamas and the PLO – Hostile Takeover of a Shell Company](#)" (in Hebrew, 12/1/05); "[Hamas and the Political Process](#)" (in Hebrew, 1/24/06); "[Abu Mazen – Asset or Liability?](#)" (1/29/06);
- On the leadership structure of the Palestinian national movement, see: "[Who should be the interlocutor: the PLO or the Palestinian Authority?](#)" (3/9/05); "[Palestinian Elections – Towards Institutional Dysfunction](#)" (12/12/05).

End.

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