



***INSS Insight*** No. 299, December 4, 2011

## **The Abbas-Mashal Meeting in Cairo**

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Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khaled Mashal met in Cairo on November 24, 2011, in order to discuss implementation of the reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas signed in May 2011 that has yet to be put into practice. At the end of the meeting the two leaders issued enthusiastic declarations about historic progress. However, two radically different versions regarding what was accomplished at this meeting emerge from the Palestinian public discourse and various commentaries. One version resembles the leaders' official reaction and presents the understandings reached at the meeting as a significant step towards the implementation of the agreement. A second version, embraced for example by senior Gaza Strip Hamas leader Mahmoud a-Zahar, downplayed the importance of the meeting, saying that it was nothing more than a repetition of what was already agreed on in May 2011; the meeting was merely a preliminary for the real negotiations that will begin in December 2011.

The meeting took place after Abbas agreed to remove the obstacle that had prevented progress to date, namely his insistence that Salam Fayyad continue to serve as prime minister. A second agreement relates to shared political principles until elections are held in May 2012. Hamas agreed to adopt the central PLO platform in the coming months, including negotiations over the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders with Jerusalem as its capital, along with Abbas' condition for renewing the negotiations, i.e., acceptance by Israel of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and a freeze on Jewish settlement activity, as well as a general ceasefire of all Palestinian organizations in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, with popular resistance through peaceful means as the primary means of resistance to the occupation and Jewish settlements. The two sides also agreed to a mutual release of detainees and to the establishment of a new elections committee and elections court, whose members would be chosen by mutual agreement. The agreements call for a meeting on December 20 of all the Palestinian factions, to be followed on December 22 by an initial meeting of the Temporary Leadership Forum consisting of Abbas as chair, the chair of the Palestinian National Council, members of PLO's executive board, and the directors-general of all the

Palestinian organizations (including, for the first time, Khaled Mashal and Ramadad Sallah, the Secretary General of the Islamic Jihad). In practice this would be the PLO's temporary leadership body that would be the decision making authority until general elections for the PA presidency, the PA parliament, and the PLO (PNC) parliament.

These agreements differ from the reconciliation agreement of May in several ways. First, the conditional relationship between the implementation of the various agreements has been removed; so that it could be possible to convene the temporary forum and hold the elections even absent an agreement on the identity of the prime minister. Second, the agreement on the framework of the temporary leadership was not included in the May 2011 agreement and in fact represents a first step towards the inclusion of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in the PLO. It may even be that it was meant to bypass the difficulty on agreeing on a unity prime minister. This is an achievement for Hamas, interested in gaining a foothold in the PLO as a first step toward taking control of it. From Hamas' perspective, the price it is paying by accepting Abbas' political plan is insignificant because in any case there is little chance that negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians will be renewed, and therefore there is no danger that the organization would have to deal with any actual results of agreeing to the plan.

From Abbas' perspective, these agreements allow him to claim with greater validity than ever before that he represents all Palestinians and enjoys support for his political agenda. He can also exert more pressure on Israel, the United States, and the international community in the face of the deadlock in the political negotiations. All of this is possible now that his political back is secure from Hamas, which accepted his political agenda. These agreements also contain a message from Abbas for Israel and all third parties, namely that a continuation of the deadlock is an expensive proposition, because it forces him to make progress in implementing the reconciliation agreement, and that will cause further deterioration in relations with Israel as well as a deep political shift within the PA.

Previous agreements between the two sides were left unfulfilled, and it remains to be seen whether the new agreements will fare any differently. This time some of the agreements are tied to an agreed-upon schedule for implementation in the immediate future (during December 2011), which will make it difficult to procrastinate and increase public pressure to implement them. In this sense, a-Zahar was right when he said that the real test lies not in the agreements but in the implementation according to the stipulated timetable.

It is fairly clear that both sides have not changed their fundamental approaches to the reconciliation agreement. Neither side is interested in having its control of its territorial region – Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Fatah in the West Bank – undermined. Both sides are interested in undermining the exclusive control of the other, so that the compromise is

actually to leave the situation in both regions as it is. Neither side is interested in the dissolution of the security forces under its control, so that in this realm too there will be no real change. Similarly, it is unclear if the two organizations are genuinely interested in elections so soon: Hamas, because the public opinion polls are not very heartening and it is hoping that the upheavals of the Arab spring and the rise of Islamic parties will over time increase the support it enjoys; and Fatah, because it is aware of its bleak organizational situation and the fragile support for it according to public opinion surveys.

Thus a situation has been created in which both sides are being pushed towards a gradual implementation of the reconciliation agreement, even though in view of their particular interests, it might be better were the agreement not implemented. They are liable to arrive at a point of no return in which they will have no choice but to implement the agreement fully, because if they fail to do so they will endure severe political damage, given the current atmosphere of the Palestinian street, which views national reconciliation as chief among Palestinian priorities.

From Israel's perspective, the primary danger is that the continued deadlock in the negotiations alongside Israel's punitive measures to pressure Abbas into changing his mind about appealing to the UN for recognition of a Palestinian state will finally lead to the creation of a new and irreversible political situation in the PA. The implementation of the unity agreement would allow Hamas to renew its political activity in the West Bank, and the combination of a political deadlock and the end to pressure on Hamas in the West Bank is a recipe for weakening the secular national Palestinian camp, which supports a political solution with Israel, and for strengthening Hamas.

