



## RIVAL PALESTINIAN GROUPS AGREE TO UNITY GOVERNMENT

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*Rival Palestinian political groups, Hamas and Fatah, have reached an agreement for a unity government in an attempt to end infighting that has killed more than 90 Palestinians since December.*

The two competing Palestinian political parties met in Saudi Arabia to try to hash out details of a unity government and ease tensions between the parties' military wings.

Their goal also was to end an international boycott that has blocked millions of dollars' worth of financial aid from the United States and Europe.

The two groups have been fighting since the Islamist party Hamas, which advocates the destruction of Israel and is considered a terrorist organization by the West, won parliamentary elections in the Palestinian region in January 2006. The group's surprising victory overturned decades of rule by the secular Fatah Party, which favors a two-state -- Israel and Palestine -- solution.

### **The Mecca Declaration**

Referred to as the "Mecca Declaration" because it took place in Islam's holiest city, the agreement will create a coalition government with the two groups for the first time.

It was signed by Khaled Mashaal of Hamas and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah.

"These dark days will be completely gone," Mashaal said when he signed the accord. "Our Arabic, Islamic unity has brought us together, shining again."

It does not, however, address completely the three conditions that international leaders have said are essential to lift the aid boycott: the recognition of Israel's right to exist, the renunciation of violence, and a willingness to abide by prior agreements made between Israel and the Palestinians.

The first two conditions are not mentioned and the third incompletely, promising "respect" for prior agreements.

The deal also did not solve the issue of who controls the government's security forces, a key detail since much of the fighting has been between security forces loyal to Fatah and Hamas

militiamen. Under the new deal, Hamas will propose candidates for the position of interior minister, which controls the security forces, and Abbas will choose one of them.

### **Israel's reaction**

Israel has not formally accepted or rejected the Palestinian agreement but did insist that the Palestinians agree to the three conditions.

"Israel insists that all of the Quartet's demands are met, as they were presented in the past," Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said at a cabinet meeting Sunday, the Jerusalem Post reported.

The Quartet is a group of Mideast negotiators made up of representatives from the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations.

### **International aid**

Since Hamas took over the legislature, the international community has suspended funding to the government that used to pay the salaries of officials and lawmakers. Humanitarian aid for food and medicine has been allowed, according to the U.S. State Department.

The block will continue at least until a Quartet meeting scheduled for Feb. 21.

The fighting between Palestinians has upset many who were used to seeing Israel as the sole enemy.

"When the Israelis killed my older son, it was very painful for me, but I understand the logic that this is our enemy and the Israelis can kill you easily. But when a Palestinian kills a Palestinian, when a Muslim kills a Muslim, this is haram. It's forbidden," said Nahid Haboush, whose 6-year-old son was killed by a stray bullet last week.

*--Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

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