

Political

update: Reconciliation talks cancelled as split between West Bank and Gaza widens - 13 October

Key points:

- Hamas has refused to attend power sharing talks in Egypt, demanding the release of all Hamas prisoners from West Bank jails
 - Palestinian Authority proceedings to declare Gaza a rebel region reportedly underway
 - Hamas bans Yasser Arafat memorials in Gaza whilst President Abbas blames Hamas for Palestinian disunity, calling on it to accept peace deals with Israel
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Latest developments

- Reconciliation talks between Hamas and Fatah, due to take place on 9 and 10 November, have been cancelled at the last minute due to Hamas' non-attendance. Egypt had been due to host "national dialogue" talks to broker Hamas and Fatah's reconciliation within the Palestinian Authority via a power-sharing agreement.
- Salah al-Bardawil, a senior Hamas official, said on Thursday (13 November) that it would be willing to resume unity talks with Fatah if it releases all 616 Hamas prisoners being held in the West Bank.
- In response to the cancelled talks, Mahmoud Abbas, leader of Fatah and President of the Palestinian Authority (PA) has reportedly started proceedings to declare Gaza a rebel, breakaway territory, discussing the option with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Abbas first suggested this on 10 August. Sources close to Abbas said on Thursday (13 November) that such a move would entail a cessation in PA sponsored humanitarian deliveries to Gaza, as well as the termination of payments for electricity and gas. The PA would also stop paying the salaries of public workers, Gazas banks would be asked to shut down and the PA would stop sending currency to the territory. Israel declared Gaza a "hostile territory" on 19 September 2007.
- Hamas has stated that they cancelled the talks as Fatah had not responded to Hamas' release of Fatah prisoners in Gaza with the release of any Hamas prisoners held in the West Bank. Hamas released 17 of its estimated 120 Fatah prisoners on 29 October in what it called a "goodwill gesture" ahead of the planned reconciliation talks. The men were released from Saraya, the main prison in the Gaza Strip.
- Hamas claimed on 28 October that Fatah had imprisoned 170 Hamas members in the West Bank during the month and on 2 November said that Palestinian security forces in the West Bank had arrested another 17 Hamas supporters over the previous two days.
- Fatah has accused Hamas of using the issue of prisoners to avoid the reconciliation talks. Mahmoud Abbas insisted on Friday (7 November) that the PA does not hold any prisoners for political reasons. He said that all Hamas supporters held in West Bank jails were criminals or had been arrested for illegal possession of weapons. Many of the recent arrests are due to a new 600 strong US trained PA paramilitary

battalion, which has been operating since 25 October in Hebron, a longtime Hamas stronghold.

- Tensions between Fatah and Hamas continued to rise over the memorial of the fourth anniversary of the death of Yasser Arafat on Tuesday (11 November). Hamas banned Gazans from holding a memorial for Arafat. Eyewitnesses said Hamas removed both Fatah flags and posters of Arafat suspended from Gazan homes and that homeowners who refused to remove the banners were taken away for questioning.
- In a speech in Ramallah to mark Arafat's death, Abbas called for the creation of a unity government that accepts the peace agreements made between the Palestinian Authority and Israel, something which Hamas has not accepted. Speaking near Arafat's mausoleum on Wednesday (12 November) Abbas accused Hamas of dividing the Palestinian people:

“We will not give up on the Palestinian national dialogue, despite all obstacles Hamas puts in the way... Our main goal is to unite our people in Gaza and the West Bank. We will do our best to reach this goal sought by the Palestinian people.” (12/11/08)

Background

- Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip from the Palestinian Authority in a violent coup in June 2007, following a period of factional violence between Hamas and Fatah throughout the Palestinian territories.
- 12 Palestinian factions, including Fatah and Hamas, were due to attend a meeting on Sunday (9 November) in Egypt for negotiations aimed at uniting the two factions in a national unity government. Fatah and Hamas were expected to sign a document of understanding at the meeting.
- The document prepared by Egypt and handed to both factions on 21 October calls for the formation of a national unity government and provides for the creation of a transitional cabinet to pave the way for simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections. The document also calls for maintaining the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas which began on 19 June.
- A Fatah official accused Hamas on 2 November of planning to avoid the reconciliation talks:

“They [Hamas] don't like the Egyptian ideas for solving the crisis in the Palestinian arena... Now that the Egyptians have sent out the invitations to the conference, Hamas is trying to find a way out. Hamas does not want to give up control over the Gaza Strip.” (02/11/08)

- Education and medical services in Gaza have suffered under Hamas' control. Public sector workers across Gaza have been on strike since the last week of August, accusing Hamas of discrimination against non-Hamas members in their hiring practices. Shaher Sae'd, Secretary General of the Palestinian General Federation of the Trade Unions (PGFTU), told a delegation of LFI MPs in Ramallah on 9 September that strike action was prompted when public sector workers not aligned with Hamas were being fired, fined, detained and even tortured.
- Hebron's troop deployment is the second deployment of US trained troops this year. 1100 troops have now been deployed under this programme allowing the PA to gain greater control over areas once dominated by terrorists.