

COMMENTARY

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International Interference Obstructs Palestinian Reconciliation

In February of this year, soon after the end of Israel's assault on Gaza, the two rival Palestinian factions Hamas and Fatah began a series of talks in Cairo, under Egyptian mediation. Their goal was to end the long-standing conflict between them and establish a united Palestinian Authority. After a period of bitter fighting in Gaza in 2007 the authority was split into a Hamas-led government in Gaza and one supported by Fatah, under President Mahmoud Abbas, in the West Bank. While initially there was guarded optimism that the talks would be successful, they seem to have stalled recently, with the two sides failing to come to any agreement.

The main reason why the Palestinian talks have been running into difficulties is that while they are between Palestinian factions, the key to resolving the issues discussed do not lie with the Palestinians themselves but rather with non-Palestinian actors, namely Israel, the United States and the International Quartet. For example, there is little chance of establishing an effective national unity government if Israel does not lift the siege of Gaza. The official response of the United States to the talks between the Palestinian factions has been lukewarm to say the least and in fact the United States has been working to undermine Palestinian unity. At the Sharm al Sheikh summit that took place shortly after the Gaza war, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton said that reconciliation would not be a positive step unless Hamas agreed to "renounce violence, recognize Israel and abide by previous commitments", such as the Oslo accords, i.e. to make the same servile concessions without any guarantee of receiving anything in return which Fatah and the PLO leadership failed to secure since the 1993 accords. Hamas' indications that it only seeks a sovereign Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza are apparently not enough. What the Americans require is submission to an Israeli-imposed order in the West Bank and Gaza, which through continued occupation and the ever-increasing settlements would make the establishment of such a state virtually impossible.



In order for the talks to have any chance of success, several issues have to be resolved. First of all, the detention of 1,045 members of Hamas in Palestinian Authority jails in the West Bank continues to impede any progress between the two sides. A few weeks ago, security forces loyal to President Abbas launched a new crackdown on Hamas supporters in the West Bank. In retaliation Hamas recently said that it would not allow Fatah representatives from Gaza to attend Fatah's upcoming Sixth Congress in the West Bank. Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri accused American Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton of being directly behind this latest wave of arrests, with the intention of forestalling any agreement between Hamas and Fatah.

General Dayton, the head of the "United States Security Coordinators Team" has been based in the West Bank since 2005. His mission is to train Palestinian security forces with the assistance of Arab countries. It appears that the purpose of these forces is to suppress any opposition activity against the Palestinian Authority and any resistance activity to Israel's occupation. Moreover, it seems Dayton's intent is to eradicate any real loyalty to the Palestinian national cause among the forces he trains. In a recent speech, Dayton described the recruits he trains as "new men" and said that Israeli military commanders often ask him "How many more of these new Palestinians can you generate, and how quickly?" Abu Zuhri's remarks imply that Dayton operates on his own accord, and issues orders to the Palestinian security forces based on an American-Israeli agenda. Hamas leader Khalid Mishal has called Dayton the greatest obstacle to the success of the reconciliation talks and recently asked President Obama to withdraw him from the Palestinian territories.

It is worth noting here that Hamas and Fatah previously did reach an agreement, the Mecca accord, following a period of bloody conflict. This agreement led to a Hamas-Fatah unity government but less than three months after Fatah and Hamas were again at war. The main reason was that the United States, Europe, and (needless to say) Israel refused to deal with the new government and kept it under sanction. George W. Bush's administration came up with an action plan which would allow Abbas to "collapse the [unity] government" if Hamas refused to meet with Quartet demands to recognize Israel and "renounce violence", by building up new security forces - under General Dayton's guidance - capable of militarily defeating Hamas. It was the arrival of a group of these forces in Gaza after training in Egypt which triggered the



Hamas takeover of Gaza in June 2007 and the present division of the Palestinian Authority. Today it seems there is little change in the policy of the United States as Clinton's remarks and Dayton's continued activities show.

So long as the United States and Europe continue their refusal to recognize Hamas as a legitimate representative of a large part – perhaps the majority – of the Palestinian people and to demand that it abandons its principles, it seems that Hamas and Fatah would not reconcile. Any reconciliation is in danger of derailment by the United States and Israel, who through General Dayton effectively control the Palestinian security forces and can use them to stir discord and conflict between Hamas and Fatah. Reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah cannot be separated from the wider predicament of the Palestinian people, who are subject to a vicious Israeli occupation which enjoys the support of the international community. Until the international community changes its stance towards Palestinian rights, it seems that the inter-Palestinian conflict will continue.

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[Seumas Milne, guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk), 29 July 2009, [There can be no Middle East settlement without Hamas](#)

[Seumas Milne, guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk), 27 July 2009, [The West widens the Fatah-Hamas split](#)

