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Hamas releases its grip on Gaza

Beyhan Sentürk reports on the Palestinian reconciliation deal from East Jerusalem.

Fatah and Hamas have signed a comprehensive reconciliation deal in Cairo following negotiations. What does the agreement spell out?

The agreement stipulates that the Palestinian Authority (PA), which is based in Ramallah, will take full control of all the ministries and public agencies in Gaza. In doing so, the PA will also assume financial authority – one of the key demands made by PA President Mahmoud Abbas. Due to internal disputes in Palestine, Hamas raised and withheld taxes in the Gaza Strip for 10 years rather than passing the funds on to Ramallah.

Azzam al-Ahmad, one of Fatah's chief negotiators and a member of the Central Committee, announced that the presidential guard would take control of the border crossing at Rafah on 1 November 2017. But two main disputed points remain unclear.

Firstly, the agreement fails to mention the future of the military wing of Hamas. According to a proposal by Egypt, a body would be established for a transitional period, represented equally by Fatah and Hamas, which would govern security in the Gaza Strip. It remains to be seen whether this would lead to the demilitarisation of Hamas – one of Israel's key demands.

Secondly, the PA has committed to integrating every public official recruited by the Hamas regime in Gaza and pledged not to dismiss them. That makes around 30,000 employees, whose salaries must be paid by the PA. This is quite a heavy burden for the PA, which is already struggling financially. It is not yet clear how these costs will be covered.

In early October, all Palestinian ministers were in Cairo for initial exploratory talks. These are expected to resume in Gaza next week in order to continue the handover process. Full control of the Gaza Strip should be handed over to the PA by 1 December 2017.

The new reconciliation agreement is essentially based on the Cairo

Agreement of 2011. The intention then, as it is now, was to hold elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council and the office of president in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. One will have to wait until 2018 to see whether these elections actually take place.

The divisions have long been regarded as irreconcilable. How did this agreement come about?

The agreement has come about because both Hamas and Fatah face tremendous pressure. Egypt has also played a major role, serving as moderator of talks between the parties.

The humanitarian situation on the coastal strip was already tense, as this part of the Palestinian territories had been under blockade for over ten years. When Hamas took power, Egypt and Israel closed off the border crossing several times because of their own security concerns after Fatah's departure. In April this year, the situation severely intensified once again when Abbas decided to stop funding electricity imports to Gaza and raise taxes on fuel supplies in the coastal strip. He also reduced financial support for healthcare and salary payments to public officials. A quarter of these civil servants were subsequently forced to retire early. Just as the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip worsened yet again, Hamas lost the vital financial support of one of its closest allies in the wake of the Qatar crisis.

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Hamas went on to find an ally in Mohammed Dahlan, a long-time rival of Abbas within Fatah. Living in exile in the United Arab Emirates, Dahlan hoped to improve relations between Hamas and the UAE and, in turn, secure a potential new source of income in the region. Dahlan moderated talks between Hamas and Egypt to extend the opening of the Rafah border crossing in summer 2017. The Gaza Strip threatened to distance itself politically from Fatah and the West Bank. These developments, coupled with the lack of progress in the peace process with Israel, meant that pressure was mounting on Fatah at the same time. The ever-autocratic Mahmoud Abbas was becoming less and less popular. And in failing to call elections, the legitimacy of the political leadership in Ramallah was also called into question.

For its part, Egypt is most interested in improving security on the

Sinai Peninsula. Terror attacks by ISIS cells have been destabilising the region for years now. The Gaza Strip is a safe haven for its fighters, as Egyptian security forces currently have no access to it. But now, all that could change. One aspect of Egypt's security strategy is coordination with Hamas, as there are fears that the situation in Gaza could worsen and inspire religious fundamentalism. Moreover, Egypt seems to be interested in acting as a mediator and key player in the peace negotiations in order to underline its regional importance.

Does the deal mean Hamas will actually be weakened? Or will it provide new opportunities for Hamas to develop in the West Bank?

This latest development may seem like a defeat for Hamas, but it is more likely to be seen as a sort of liberation for them, which could potentially also lead to the movement strategically repositioning itself. The agreement frees Hamas from taking responsibility for many of the problems plaguing the Gaza Strip. Once the PA takes over control, any criticism of the situation in the Gaza Strip will be directed at the leadership in Ramallah. Hamas can now focus on its efforts to integrate itself into political life in Palestine.

In the West Bank, Hamas could expect greater freedom of movement and influence, although it might be too early to tell whether this will be the case. Analysts currently believe that Hamas will gradually try to integrate itself into the political process. However, in the short term, there will not likely be many opportunities for Hamas in the West Bank, not least because Israel will continue to control this area for the foreseeable future.

How will these developments be viewed by Israel and Egypt?

We can expect Egypt and Israel to coordinate very closely during the negotiations between Fatah and Hamas. An agreement is a win-win for both countries. Security for their borders and the border region around the Gaza Strip is highly important to them both. With Egypt acting as mediator, the humanitarian situation in Gaza could also be defused, without Israel having to intervene directly. Furthermore, it may be in Israel's interest for the security situation in the Gaza Strip to stabilise under the auspices of a reliable partner, instead of sustained violence breaking out between Israel and Hamas again, as last seen in 2014. Environmental pollution, particularly in the coastal region, is an ecological threat to both neighbouring countries and something which must be tackled by both parties.

As it stands, a final agreement has only been reached on the issue of administrative control over the Gaza Strip. It is still unclear whether an agreement has been brokered by Egypt on security control over

Gaza or on the political future of the Palestinian territories if Hamas came to form part of a unity government, which would cross a red line for Israel. Nevertheless, we can expect to see both sides continuing to work closely together on this issue.

Interview by Hannes Alpen.



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