

Interview

Palestinians wary of Israeli intent towards Fatah-Hamas reconciliation

Emna Jubran

Tunis

The Palestinian people inside the occupied territories or in the diaspora would “punish” the party that brought about a failure of the recent reconciliation efforts between Hamas and Fatah, warned Palestinian Ambassador to Tunisia Hael al-Fahoum.

Fahoum expressed optimism that, despite the failure of previous mediation efforts, the latest rapprochement bid hosted by Cairo would prove successful. “There are some obstacles in the path of national unity but they can be overcome,” Fahoum said in an interview with The Arab Weekly. “Obstacles are to be expected but solutions must be found.”

Hamas and Fatah representatives signed an agreement by which Hamas would hand over administrative control of Gaza, including the Rafah crossing with Egypt, to the Palestinian Author-

ity by December 1.

The Palestinian factions formed committees to sort out unresolved issues between Fatah and Hamas, most notably security control in Gaza. Fatah and Hamas, as well as other factions, will seek to form a unity government.

The recent Cairo talks indicated that Palestinian leaders were showing more commitment to the interests of their homeland, Fahoum said. “Being loud will not lead to finding solutions. If we want to serve our country, we need to think calmly and with an open mind,” he said.

Both sides, Fahoum stressed, needed to assess their capacities, especially considering the political climate in the region. “How can we develop a strategy if we do not know our own capabilities? How can we put realities on the ground if we do not read our regional environment?” he asked.

Fahoum said the unity agreement would deny Israel using Palestinian disunity as an excuse for not being committed to peace. “Israel will try to sabotage the Palestinian unity process,” he warned.

The United Nations, the Arab League and some Western

countries welcomed the reconciliation plan. Israel, however, issued a statement saying: “The government of Israel will not carry out political negotiations with a Palestinian government that relies on Hamas.”

Israeli officials demanded that Hamas agree to several conditions, including recognising Israel and agreeing to disarm.

Fahoum argued that by guaranteeing the rights of the Palestinian people, Israel would be serving its own purposes because “Palestine is the only guarantor of stability and security.”

Fahoum noted that Hamas, like Fatah, was a part of the Palestinian people and foreign attempts to divide the Palestinians must be rejected.

“Hamas, with the other Palestinian factions, must serve Palestine and the interests of the Palestinians,” he said. He stressed that differences between the factions must not be at the expense of the territory.

Fahoum praised the role of Egypt in brokering Palestinian unity. “Egypt is a major player in the region and it has a national interest in Palestinian reconciliation,” he said. “It played a positive role in creating the right



Signs of change. Palestinian Ambassador to Tunisia Hael al-Fahoum.

(The Arab Weekly)

conditions and ground for the success of this reconciliation.”

He expressed hope that Egypt would continue its mediation role and reject Israeli pressure to thwart Palestinian reconciliation. Fahoum said there was international enthusiasm for Palestinian reconciliation.

“The failure of Palestinian reconciliation will have negative consequences,” he said, as it would further divide people in the region. “There is an Arab and an international consensus that you cannot have stability in the region without the establishment of a Palestinian state.”

Emna Jubran is a Tunisian journalist.

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Israel plans settlements spree against Palestinian, international will

The Arab Weekly staff

London

Israeli authorities are approving plans to expand settlements in the occupied West Bank, drawing criticism from Palestinians and possibly hindering a US plan to restart Middle East peace talks.

Settlement watchdog Peace Now reported that a committee overseeing settlement construction in the West Bank had approved 2,646 settler homes. Peace Now said the settlement push was “distancing us daily from the possibility of a two-state solution.”

“The government is sending a clear message to settlers: Build illegally and anywhere and we will find a solution for you,” it said in a statement.

About 12,000 housing units are to be given various stages of approval this year, four times the number in 2016.

A list provided by the NGO showed homes to be built in locations across the territory, including 146 in Nokdim, a southern West Bank settlement near Bethlehem where Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman lives.

An Israeli committee also approved permits for 31 settler homes in Hebron, the first such green light for the flashpoint West Bank city since 2002. Several hundred Israeli settlers live in the heart of Hebron under heavy military guard, among some 200,000 Palestinians.

The Hebron units are to be built on Shuhada Street, once an important market road leading to the holy site where the biblical patriarch Abraham is believed to be buried. The street is largely closed off to Palestinians.

The approvals came after Israeli

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s government pledged a major boost in signing off on settlement homes this year.

Palestinian presidential spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina condemned the settlement activity.

“Netanyahu defies the world and especially [US] President [Donald] Trump’s administration with his insistence on continuing settlements on the land of the state of Palestine,” he said in a statement carried by official news agency Wafa.

Trump is seeking to restart peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, which have been frozen since a US-led initiative collapsed in 2014.

Settlement building in the West Bank and annexed East Jerusalem is considered illegal under international law. It is a major obstacle to peace as the settlements are built on land the Palestinians see as part of their future state.

The European Union condemned the step and demanded Israel reconsider its plans.

“The European Union has requested clarifications from Israeli authorities and conveyed the expectation that they reconsider these decisions, which are detrimental to ongoing efforts towards meaningful peace talks,” an EU statement said.

The bloc voiced particular concern about proposals to build settler homes in Hebron and about the start of groundwork in the East Jerusalem area of Givat Hamatos. Construction in Givat Hamatos would “severely jeopardise the contiguity and viability of a future Palestinian state,” the European Union said.

Netanyahu’s right-wing coalition government leans heavily on settlers and their supporters to maintain its thin parliamentary majority.

Israeli officials said about 12,000 housing units will be given various stages of approval this year, four times the number in 2016.

Last month, US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, a supporter of settlements, enraged Palestinians when he told an Israeli TV interviewer that Israel was

“only occupying 2% of the West Bank.” The Yesha Council, which represents settlers across the West Bank, welcomed the ambassador’s comments.

More than 60% of the West Bank is under near complete Israeli control, the United Nations said, and other areas of the territory are under Israeli security control. The portion of the West Bank that is in theory under both Palestinian civilian and security control are sometimes raided by Israeli soldiers.

Approximately 430,000 Israeli settlers live among 2.6 million Palestinians in the West Bank, occupied by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War.

Prominent members of Netanyahu’s coalition openly oppose the

idea of a Palestinian state and advocate annexing most of the West Bank but controversy on the issue has also courted left-wing politicians.

The head of Israel’s main opposition Labour Party drew fire after saying that Israeli settlements could be retained in a future peace with the Palestinians. In an interview with Israeli commercial TV Channel Two, Avi Gabay said the concept of having to pull out of settlements in the Israeli-occupied West Bank as part of a peace treaty had become outdated.

“If you make peace, why do you need to evict (settlers)? I think that the terminology in which we are accustomed to speak here, by which if you make a peace treaty you evict

people are not necessarily right,” he said in Hebrew.

“If you make a peace agreement, you can find solutions that don’t oblige you to dismantle (settlements),” he said. “You’re making peace!”

Gabay was elected in July to head Labour, which has historically supported an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.

A day later, he elaborated on his comments. “I am in favour of reaching a diplomatic solution which is based on two states for two peoples, where their state is demilitarised,” he told Channel Two.

The Arab Weekly staff and news agencies.

What you need to know about Israeli settlements

Here are key questions and answers on Israeli settlements:

► What are settlements?

Settlements are Israeli villages, towns and cities built on territory Israel seized during the Six-Day War of 1967.

Approximately 430,000 Israeli settlers live in the occupied West Bank along with 2.6 million Palestinians. A further 200,000 Israelis live in annexed East Jerusalem along with at least 300,000 Palestinians, who want to make the sector the capital of their future state.

Israel seized part of the Golan Heights from Syria and the Gaza Strip from Egypt and established settlements in both. It evacuated the Gaza settlements in 2005.

► What is their legal status?

From the 1970s, Israel established a network of settlements throughout the occupied West Bank.

The Oslo Accords of the 1990s divided the territory into Israeli- and Palestinian-governed zones meant to lay the ground for a future Pal-

estian state but Israel continued to build and expand settlements there.

Palestinian violence led to calls from Israelis to build more settlements in response.

The United Nations and most of the international community see Israeli settlements in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as illegal.

Israel differentiates between those it has approved and those it has not, often called outposts.

Successive Israeli governments have invested billions of dollars in the settlements over the past 50 years.

► Who are the settlers?

Many Israelis moved to the settlements in search of affordable housing. The government encouraged them to move to cities such as Ariel, Maale Adumim and the ultra-Orthodox settlements of Beitar Ilit and Modiin Ilit.

There are also many national-religious hardliners who see living in the biblical lands of Judaea and Samaria as fulfilling a divine promise. Hundreds of them live near the

Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, a holy site for both Jews and Muslims and a focal point of violence between Israelis and Palestinians.

► How do Palestinians see settlements?

Palestinians consider Israeli settlements a war crime and a major obstacle to peace.

The Palestinians want Israel to withdraw from all land it occupied in the Six-Day War and to dismantle all Jewish settlements, although they have accepted the principle of minor land swaps equal in size and value.

Israel rules out a full return to pre-1967 borders but has, in the past, expressed a willingness to pull out of some parts of the West Bank while annexing its largest settlement blocs, which are home to most of the settlers in the territory.

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who heads what is seen as the most right-wing government in Israeli history, recently said he plans no “uprooting” of settlements.

(Agence France-Presse)