

Netanyahu: Palestinian Unity Government 'Strengthens Terrorism'

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas swore in a unity government on Monday in Ramallah after overcoming a last-minute dispute with Hamas.

"Today and after announcing the government of national unity we declare the end of division that caused catastrophic harm to our cause," Abbas said.

The formation of the unity government represents a major step toward ending the seven-year rift between Fatah and Hamas, which started when Hamas violently seized the Gaza Strip from Fatah in 2007. The rival factions reached a reconciliation deal in April, a move that led Israel to suspend peace talks with the Palestinian Authority.

Hamas, which has carried out scores of bombing, shooting and rocket attacks against Israeli targets, is considered a terror group by Israel and the West.

In recent weeks, Fatah and Hamas negotiators met repeatedly to agree on a government of technocrats backed by both sides that is to prepare for general elections in 2015.

Ministers in the new administration took an oath of office on Monday in a televised inauguration ceremony in Ramallah, the Palestinian seat of government in the West Bank. The cabinet has 17 members. Three ministers from Hamas-run Gaza were denied entry to the West Bank by Israel.

Fatah and Hamas negotiated until the last minute on Monday over the composition of the cabinet. Hamas demanded that Abbas reverse a decision to remove the position of prisoner affairs

minister from the government.

Moments before the start of the swearing-in ceremony, senior Hamas official Khalil al-Hayeh said the dispute was resolved.

In a telephone call on Sunday, Abbas told U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry that the unity government would comprise technocrats, independent professionals without political ties to Fatah or Hamas.

During the call, Kerry "expressed concern about Hamas' role in any such government and the importance that the new government commit to the principles of nonviolence, recognition of the State of Israel and acceptance of previous agreements with it," U.S. State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said.

"President Abbas assured the secretary that the new government would be committed to these principles."

Kerry will reportedly meet with Abbas in Jordan on Wednesday.

On Sunday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged the international community not to back a Palestinian unity government, saying such a move would "strengthen terrorism."

At the start of Sunday's cabinet meeting, Netanyahu called on the international community "not to run to recognize the Palestinian government of which Hamas is a part and which rests on Hamas. Hamas is a terrorist organization that calls for the destruction of Israel and the international community must not embrace it."

Netanyahu convened another cabinet meeting on Monday for a discussion on the Palestinian unity government and potential sanctions Israel could impose on it.

On Saturday, Abbas said Israel had warned him that it would take punitive steps against the new Palestinian government, such as withholding the monthly transfer of some \$100 million in taxes and customs Israel collects on behalf of the

Palestinian Authority.

“They are going to withhold our money. This is our money, not aid from Israel, and we will not stay silent. They want to punish us because we have an agreement with Hamas, which is part of our people.”

“We are going to react to any Israeli action,” Abbas said.

Abbas has said that the unity government would follow his pragmatic program.

“We say [the government] is going to recognize Israel, denounce violence and recognize the international agreements,” Abbas said. “This is a technocrat government. It has nothing to do with Fatah, Hamas or any factions.”

It is not yet clear what the American response will be to the formation of the Palestinian unity government. On Sunday, Caitlin Hayden, a spokeswoman for the U.S. National Security Council, said the White House would not comment “until something is actually announced.”

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