

Palestinian factions sign reconciliation agreement in Algeria

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Palestinians celebrate after Hamas said it reached a deal with Palestinian rival Fatah, in Gaza City
The leaders of 14 Palestinian factions held two days of talks in the run-up to an Arab summit in Algiers next month [File: Anadolu]

Algiers, October 14 (RHC)-- Rival Palestinian factions meeting in Algiers for talks mediated by the Algerian government have agreed on a reconciliation deal that aims to resolve 15 years of discord through new elections in the occupied Palestinian territories.

The agreement was signed by senior Fatah leader Azzam al-Ahmad; chief of the Hamas political bureau, Ismail Haniya; and the secretary general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Talal Naji.

"This is an historical moment, through which we see Jerusalem," Haniya said before he thanked Algerian President Abdelmajeed Tabboune for his country's efforts in sponsoring the talks. For his part, al-Ahmad said: "We are proud to stand in this moment, under the auspices of President Abdelmajeed Tabboune, ... to sign this deal and get rid of this [political] split and cancer that has entered the Palestinian body." "As Fatah, we pledge to be the first to execute this agreement," he added.

Other Palestinian figures who were invited to sign the document included Ahmed Majdalani, a senior member of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO); Mustafa Barghouti, the secretary general of the Palestinian National Initiative; and Bassam al-Salhi, secretary general of the Palestinian People's Party.

The agreement was signed after the leaders of 14 factions, including President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah movement and Hamas -- the group that governs the besieged Gaza Strip -- held two days of talks in the run-up to an Arab summit in Algiers next month.

According to Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem, the deal does not include a section on forming a unity government but it does include clauses on developing the structures of the PLO, forming its national council and holding legislative and presidential elections. There was scepticism back home, however, that they would deliver any concrete changes after previous promises of elections failed to materialise.

Under the agreement, the parties promised to "speed up the holding of presidential and legislative elections in all of the Palestinian territories including Jerusalem" to within a year. It also recognised the PLO, of which Abbas is the head, as the sole representative of the Palestinian people.

Political schisms since 2007 have weakened Palestinian aspirations for statehood and have prevented presidential and parliamentary elections from taking place since ballots were last cast in 2005 and 2006.

Hamas's legislative victory then laid the ground for the political rupture. The group, which opposes peace with Israel, seized control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 while Abbas's Western-backed Palestinian Authority stayed dominant in the occupied West Bank. Since then, Gaza has been under a brutal Israeli-Egyptian blockade and has faced at least three Israeli assaults.

"We have very high hopes this time around, especially because of the latest Israeli assault on our people," Qassem told Al Jazeera. Fatah and Hamas have previously attempted to resolve their difference in several rounds of talks and even agreed to form an interim government in the past, but a reconciliation has yet to materialise.

In the occupied Palestinian territories, people have been following the talks in Algeria with little optimism that an agreement will deliver change.

Tabboune wants to use next month's Arab League summit – the first since before the COVID-19 pandemic – to cement his country's place as a regional heavyweight. It has held talks for months with Palestinian factions to pave the way for a deal.

Renewed demand for Algerian oil and gas and the end of mass street protests that rocked the country in 2019 and 2020 have bolstered its confidence on the international stage. However, its ongoing dispute with neighbouring Morocco, which has impacted both countries' relations with major European states, has overshadowed the run-up to the summit.

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