



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

## ASSESSMENT REPORT

# The US Stance on the Palestinian Unity Government

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | June 2014

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## Introduction

On April 23, the two Palestinian movements Fatah and Hamas announced the formation of a national unity government, putting an end to seven years of division between the West Bank, under the control of Fatah, and the Gaza Strip, controlled by Hamas. Subsequently, the appointed prime minister of the Palestinian Authority, Rami al-Hamdallah, proposed a new cabinet composed of independent technocrats, whose main mission is to organize the Palestinian presidential and parliamentary elections within six months of the cabinet's formation. The new government took its official oath on June 2 in the presence of President Mahmoud Abbas. Israel quickly announced its rejection of the Palestinian government, under the pretext that it is supported by Hamas. During his visit to Beirut on June 4, US Secretary of State John Kerry declared that his government will work with the new Palestinian government, and will observe the extent of its commitment to cooperate with Israel, while ensuring that the Palestinian cabinet "doesn't cross the line".

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed his extreme frustration with this American posture. This public US-Israel row over the formation of a Palestinian unity government raises a number of questions: is this a temporary disagreement over a specific issue? Or are we witnessing a deeper and more complex rift? The recent US-Israeli differences also prompt questions regarding the US stance toward the Hamas movement, which it classifies as a terrorist organization, and whether the US is showing signs of changing its policy toward Hamas.

## The US Position toward the Palestinian Unity Government

The US readiness to work with the Palestinian unity government came on the heels of a number of conditions that President Abbas has committed to abide by. According to Secretary of State John Kerry and the State Department Spokesperson Jen Psaki, this is a new, technocratic government that will include no members from Hamas, or anyone affiliated with it, and it will commit to President Abbas's political program, which calls for recognizing Israel, respecting previous agreements with it, and rejecting violence. These are the same conditions placed by the International Quartet (the US, the EU, Russia, and the UN) to recognize Hamas as an internationally-accepted Palestinian political movement, in addition to the continuation of the Palestinian Authority's security coordination with Israel. Based on the extent of Palestinian adherence to these

commitments, the US will determine its future policy on the Palestinian unity government.

Significantly, the US's stance did not announce its recognition of the new Palestinian cabinet, other than declaring its preparedness to work with it, within the scope of previous American conditions. This was the gist of Kerry's statements in his press conference in Beirut, when he stated: "the United States does not recognize a government with respect to Palestine because that would recognize a state and there is no state".<sup>1</sup> This signifies that the US, which opposed the PLO's attempt to garner the recognition of the UN General Assembly as a "non-member state" in November 2012, persists in its position, echoing the Israeli stance that the Palestinian state should only be an outcome of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations.

## Background to the US–Israeli Disagreement

The latest quarrel between Israel and the US is one episode in a chain of disputes between the administration of US President Barack Obama and Netanyahu's government. Since Obama entered the White House in early 2009, relations between the two have been tense, particularly given President Obama's prioritization of the Middle East settlement since he started his presidency. Obama increased pressure on Israel and escalated his rhetoric toward the Israeli government in an unprecedented manner. In his Cairo speech in June 2009, Obama affirmed, "it is time for settlements to stop". In a meeting at the White House in July 2009, he proceeded to warn the leaders of Jewish-American organizations, already worried by his sharp tone toward Israel, that he would pressure the Israelis in order to achieve "peace" in the region, and that he would not allow the pattern of US-Israeli relations to continue as it did during the eight years of the Bush administration. This posturing led to serious tensions between him and Netanyahu, with the latter challenging him on numerous occasions. Nevertheless, eight months of "unprecedented" American pressures on Israel in 2009, with the objective of forcing Israel to agree to "freeze" settlement activities as negotiations were being pursued, did not succeed in dissuading the Israel's right-wing government from continuing to build and expand settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Eventually, Obama retreated after months of failed attempts to

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of State, "Press Availability in Beirut, Lebanon," June 4, 2014 <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/06/227100.htm>.

pressure the Israeli leader, and with the nearing of the Congressional midterm elections in late 2010.

Following the 2012 elections, bringing Obama a second term, many observers predicted that he would likely avoid being implicated anew in the Middle East peace issues since they had caused significant tensions during his first term. Obama, however, defied expectations with his Secretary of State John Kerry personally taking charge of the file. Kerry's efforts resulted in convincing both parties to return to the negotiations' table in July 2013 on the basis of a nine-month round of negotiations that ended in late April 2014.

Kerry's efforts, however, stumbled against many hurdles placed by Israel, leading to the total collapse of the negotiations in early April 2014, when the Netanyahu government announced its intention to build additional settlements in occupied East Jerusalem, and proceeded to backtrack from the conditions set by the resumption of negotiations to release 26 Palestinian detainees. The Palestinian Authority responded to these actions in early April 2014 by applying for membership in 15 international treaties and agreements out of 63 international treaties, agreements, and agencies that Palestine is allowed to join.

At the time, it was evident that Kerry implicitly blamed Israel as the main party responsible for the collapse of negotiations, which was stated in his testimony to the US Senate's Foreign Relations Committee on April 7, 2014. In late April, the testimony was followed by comments he made during a closed meeting in Washington, which were subsequently leaked. Kerry apparently warned that Israel may turn into an apartheid state if it does not sign a peace agreement with the Palestinians, which angered the Israeli lobby, forcing him to apologize.

The latest row between Obama's administration and the Netanyahu government falls within the context of a deep conflict that reflects two different approaches to a peaceful settlement in the Middle East. The US administration, angered by Israel's actions and intransigence, believes that the achievement of a settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict represents US-Israeli interests, though Netanyahu's government remains captive to the influence of the Israeli Right and the settlers who are heavily represented within it.

## Is there a Shift in the US Position toward Hamas?

Despite the significance and acuteness of the US-Israeli discord over the formation of a Palestinian national unity government, Washington has not changed its approach toward the Hamas movement. Hamas, which former US President Bill Clinton designated a terrorist organization in 1997, remains as such from Washington's perspective. During his press conference in Beirut, Kerry was careful to assert this stance, indicating that Hamas has not accepted the Quartet principles, continues to call for the destruction of Israel, and is a terrorist organization. This means that the Washington-Tel Aviv disagreement is not related to the Palestinian national unity government as much as it related to the frustration of the Obama administration with the practices of the Israeli government toward the peace process in general, which is what led to reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah in the first place. By agreeing to cooperate with the Palestinian unity government, the US is sending a message of displeasure and implicit protest to the Israelis, indicating its frustration with Israeli practices that continue to sabotage US efforts for a Middle East settlement. It also expresses an implicit US acknowledgment of the bitter reality: the hindering of a potential peace settlement due to Israeli intransigence. Based on this logic, the US found no sense in rejecting the Palestinian internal reconciliation, particularly since the Palestinians do not possess many alternatives to express the crisis it is enduring because of the hindered negotiations, not to mention the US's inability to change the rules of the game.

While it can be argued that the US is saying they are "ready to cooperate" with the Palestinian unity government in order to pressure the Israelis and push Netanyahu toward more inflexible policies, one should not conclude that a shift in the US approach toward Hamas and the Palestinian national unity is underway. The US expressed readiness to cooperate with a technocratic government that adopts President Abbas's political line, and not with a real Palestinian unity government, which never existed in the first place. The US clearly understands this fact. Another stance can be gleaned in the US's relatively flexible position toward the new Palestinian cabinet—the US administration realizes that the window of opportunity for meaningful Palestinian-Israeli negotiations is closing fast, as the Congressional mid-term elections will be taking place later this year, after which Obama will turn into a political "lame duck," especially with predictions that Obama's Democratic Party may lose control of the Senate. Regardless of who will hold the majority in the US Congress, expecting real American pressures



against Israel has proven to be no more than an illusion, a line that is oft repeated in the Arab media but one that continues to lack any substance.