The Hamas movement announced that PA ministers would cease their activities within the Hamas movement (Regular, Ha’aretz, 4/7/06). Government representatives requested that the new government be referred to as the “PA Government” and not the “Hamas Government” (Rubinstein, Ha’aretz, 4/10/06).

The Re’ut Institute contends that these declarations could be the first stage in a strategy designed to break off the international coalition against Hamas.

What is the Issue?

• Israel and the international community presented the Palestinians with three demands: to recognize Israel, to reaffirm existing agreements and to end violence.
• The international coalition, created to pressure Hamas to accept these demands, has significantly decreased economic assistance to the PA.
• However, these actions could severely obstruct Palestinian economic activity and result in a humanitarian crisis or the dismantling of the PA.
• Moreover, should Hamas accept the demands or cede control over the PA, the PA’s ability to govern may be substantially damaged.
• The worse the economic situation in the PA becomes, the less stable the international coalition will be. There are already signs that it is beginning to unravel: see actions by Russia, France, China and India.
• Therefore, if Israel does not want to be held responsible for a humanitarian crisis or face the collapse of the PA, it needs to seek a way out from the maze.

Why is this Important? Why Now?

• Members of the Quartet, that lead the international coalition, have no consistent mindset regarding the entity subject to the demands:
  o The US directs the demands to “Hamas”, while imposing sanctions on the PA, due to Hamas’ control over the government (for the Congressional legislation proposing a freeze on financial assistance to the PA see the AIPAC website);
  o The EU is directing its demands towards the “PA government”, i.e. the EU would repeal its sanctions if the government accepts the aforementioned demands (See Council of European Union, 4/10/06).
  o The UN and Russia called on the international community not to freeze aid to the PA (See Al-Hayat Al-Jadida 3/1/06; Al-Hayat, 2/9/06).
• Even Israel is not presenting a consistent position (see Foreign Ministry press release, 3/22/06), and refers to “Hamas” and the “Hamas government” alternately.
• In this context it appears that the distinction made by Hamas between the government and the movement could be the first step towards meeting the conditions set by the EU.
• Such move could trigger the renewal of European aid and further fragment the international coalition.
Policy Options

- Does Israel want “to go the distance with Hamas”? – If so, Israel must insist that the Hamas movement (and not the government) explicitly comply with the three demands.

  On the one hand, achieving this objective will likely necessitate a harsh economic crisis within the PA and a political crisis which might eventually lead to the collapse of the PA. On the other hand, the economic crisis may undermine the unity of the int. coalition.

- Is Israel ready for a compromise with Hamas? – i.e. Hamas government will explicitly or implicitly accept the three demands, whereas the Hamas movement will remain committed to its fundamentalist ideology.

Such scenario would likely prevent a humanitarian crisis in the PA, but would make Israel directly deal with people like Mahmoud Al-Zahar.

For additional sources see the Re’ut Institute website: www.reut-institute.org and the Re’ut Institute website on the subject of the Israeli challenge of dealing with Hamas.

  http://www.reut2006.info/hamas/eng/

  On the issue of Hamas, see: “Who is Required to Recognize Israel” (4/2/06); “Blocking Transfer of Funds is Ineffective Against the Hamas PA” (March 2006); “Does Israel Really want to Bring Hamas Down” (3/29/06); “Is the PA about to be Dismantled?” (3/22/06); “Is there an International Coalition against Hamas?” (3/21/06); “The PA Under Hamas – From Partner to Address” (3/7/06); “The Hamas Movement and the Political Process” (in Hebrew, 1/24/06); “Can Hamas Continue to Enjoy Both Worlds?” (in Hebrew, 5/24/06).

End.