

MIFTAH - Palestinian Militants Hold Fire

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Ramallah, West Bank - The new Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and the militant group Hamas have resolved for now a crisis over a cease-fire with Israel, raising hopes for a period of calm here after four years of violence.

After straining the cease-fire agreed to last week by launching rocket attacks on Israeli settlements in Gaza Thursday, Hamas agreed Saturday to refrain from immediate retaliation for Israeli army actions in the future. According to agreements reached with Mr. Abbas, Hamas now says it will consult the Palestinian Authority before taking actions.

It made the concession during talks in Gaza with Abbas while promising to adhere to a "temporary lull" in fighting, says Hassan Yusuf, the senior leader of the movement in the West Bank. "We pledge not to take the initiative in carrying out resistance operations," he says. "We will now be watching the Israeli behavior on the ground."

Hamas's position is seen as ensuring in the short term that there is no Palestinian infighting, and as a boost to Abbas's ability to make good on a commitment he made - reciprocated by Israel - at last week's summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, to halt violence, Palestinian analysts say.

But sharp differences with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, another Palestinian militant group, remain. The factions oppose the steps Abbas must take under the international peace blueprint known as the road map, including a requirement that the PA begin weapons confiscations. Hamas has said that it will not turn over weapons "as long as there is Israeli occupation."

Moreover, Israel is unenthusiastic about the new Hamas-Abbas understandings, saying an all-out crackdown by Abbas is what is needed.

Hamas said the Thursday rocket attacks in Gaza, which caused no casualties, were a response to the Israeli army's killing of a Palestinian in the southern Gaza town of Rafah. But, coming just a day after the summit in Egypt, they were widely seen as a test for Abbas.

"I think he has passed the test and came out of it in a strong position," says Samih Shabib, a historian at Bir Zeit University near Ramallah. The same day as the rocket attacks, Abbas fired three top security forces commanders, signaling he expected forces to prevent rocketing. Also, the PA issued a

statement that it and the ruling Fatah movement would act against anyone who tries "to harm the achievements of the Palestinian Authority at the Sharm el-Sheikh meeting."

In Mr. Shabib's view, Hamas's decision to cooperate with Abbas reflects the group's recognition that his approach of ending the armed intifada and reviving negotiations has wide backing abroad.

"The Europeans, the Americans, Egypt, and Jordan are all in agreement that there should be calm and that this Palestinian president is in harmony with such a calm. Hamas and Islamic Jihad find themselves unable to confront this," he says.

Shabib predicts that the current cease-fire is likely to endure longer than the one Abbas arranged as Palestinian prime minister in 2003 that lasted just 50 days before collapsing under the weight of continued Israeli army operations and Palestinian attacks. One of the reasons he cites for a better chance this time is that Washington "needs a lull for the passage of the constitution in Iraq. The achievement of a breakthrough in Palestine will reduce tensions in the Middle East as a whole. If Israel practices violence, it is clear this would be harming the US interest."

The Israeli cabinet Sunday approved plans to release 500 Palestinian prisoners, with officials saying they could be freed by Wednesday. An Israeli transfer to the PA of security authority for the West Bank city of Jericho is also expected this week.

Hisham Ahmed, a political scientist at Bir Zeit University, says Hamas's cooperation with the Palestinian president reflects a desire "to not be blamed by the public for being the party that weakens Abbas."

Ahmed does not believe that Israel will respect its cease-fire obligations, however. "My concern is that Sharon will hasten to destroy the fabric of [Palestinian] cohesion that has been achieved," he says.

Israel, for its part, says Hamas's agreement to observe a de facto truce, is aimed only at gaining a respite to rebuild its military wing, which has been battered by the Israeli army.

"Hamas needs the quiet to arm itself to the teeth," says Deputy Director-General Gideon Meir of the Israeli foreign ministry. "The only way out of this situation is for [Abbas] to dismantle Hamas and all the infrastructure of terror."

But the PA says there are other ways to ensure Hamas refrains from attacks. "If Israel withdraws from the cities, releases prisoners, lifts checkpoints, lets workers go back to their jobs, and takes other steps that impact on public

opinion, it will be difficult for Hamas to say 'I want to shoot,' " says PA Minister of State Kadura Fares. The understanding reached Saturday is a step toward Hamas recognizing that there is only one authority in the Palestinian territories - the PA.

Yasser Abed Rabbo, a PLO executive committee member, told Al Jazeera Saturday that the PA will not tolerate "a plurality of militias and armies" and will confiscate illegal weapons. But shortly thereafter on the same program, the Hamas leader Yusuf said, "there is no one with a brain in his head who can say put away the weapon of the resistance while there is aggression.... The legal weapon is that which combats the occupation."