

Hamas opens Palestinian offices in Arab world

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Hamas is considering opening branches for the Palestinian parliament in several Arab states to reach out to the world and overcome travel restrictions caused by an Israeli blockade of Gaza

Hamas leaders said the idea was still under discussion, but sources said Hamas lawmaker Marwan Abu Rass has left the Gaza Strip for Damascus to prepare for the opening of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC)'s first branch outside the Palestinian territories.

"The Change and Reform parliamentary bloc of Hamas is thinking seriously of opening a regular office in the Syrian capital," Ismail al-Ashqar, another Hamas legislator, told Xinhua. "Such a step would help break the siege on the bloc's members."

Meanwhile, Ahmed Bahar, deputy speaker of the PLC, confirmed that the parliament's foreign offices would be open soon "in all Arab capitals, not only in Damascus."

"At the beginning, the branches will be in Syria and Egypt before spreading out to all Arab capitals," Bahar told reporters in Gaza. "The aim is to communicate with the world and the Arab parliaments, given the tight blockade of Gaza."

In January 2006, Hamas defeated the long-dominant Fatah party of President Mahmoud Abbas and scored a landslide victory in the legislative elections.

A year later, Israel shut down all commercial crossings with Gaza and Egypt maintained the closure of Rafah border crossing point -- the only gate that bypasses Israel for Gazans to the outside world, in response to Hamas' violent takeover of the coastal strip.

Israel, the West and most of the Arab countries do not recognize the Hamas regime which controls Gaza despite a decision by Abbas sacking a Hamas-led unity government after the Gaza fighting.

The PLC was paralyzed following the political split between the Hamas-controlled Gaza and the West Bank where the Fatah-dominated Palestinian National Authority (PNA) holds sway.

Analysts say the decision to open foreign offices for the PLC will widen the political split between the two powerful Palestinian factions and harm Egypt's efforts to reconcile Hamas and Fatah.

A latest Egyptian initiative suggests holding parliamentary elections by the middle of next year to pave way for the long-awaited reconciliation. On Monday, Hamas responded to the Cairo proposal, saying its reply was positive.

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