

Fatah and Hamas eye truce deal

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Hamas and Fatah, the warring parties that have divided the Palestinian territories, may agree this month to an Egyptian-brokered deal that sketches out a path to peace between them, but which also faces many further obstacles

Officials close to the negotiations, which have been going on for much of the two years since Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in a brief civil war, said on Sunday a deal may be signed in Cairo on Oct. 22. Talks are due to begin on Oct. 19.

Despite frequent such meetings in Egypt, the Islamist Hamas and secular Fatah, led by President Mahmoud Abbas, have missed several previous deadlines. The deal would map out a process of reconciliation, intended to culminate in presidential and parliamentary elections.

Both sides are sounding more positive on the chances of signing an accord this time, which would start the countdown towards elections in late June. But officials are still cautious on the chances of seeing the process through, given the deep resentments felt on either side.

Mohammad Dahlan, a Gaza-born senior figure in Fatah, now based with Abbas in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, told Reuters much depended on clarifications Abbas would be seeking on Hamas's final offer when he meets Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman in the Jordanian capital Amman on Monday.

"There is a difference between what we are hearing from our brothers in Egypt and the positive statements by Khaled Meshaal," Dahlan said of the Egyptian mediators and the Syria-based leader of Hamas. The Islamists have said they expect to sign a revised reconciliation pact later this month.

"There are still sticking points," Dahlan said on Sunday.

Among these were Fatah's rejection of a key element in the draft pact that calls for a joint committee of members from Hamas, Fatah and other political parties that would liaise between the internationally isolated Hamas government in Gaza and Abbas's Western-backed Palestinian Authority in Ramallah.

Hamas would also be able to supervise a joint police force in Gaza in the run-up to the June elections, something Fatah sees as cementing Hamas control there after what it calls the "coup" of June 2007.

Dozens of Fatah men were among over 100 people killed then in a week of fighting in the coastal enclave, which is divided from the West Bank by 30 km (20 miles) of Israeli territory.

In Gaza on Sunday, however, Hamas official Sami Abu Zuhri said things looked set for an agreement.

"We have accepted the content of the Egyptian paper and that has prepared the ground for signing an agreement at the forthcoming Cairo meeting," he said. "Any failure to reach that would not be of Hamas's making."

Egypt hopes to end Fatah and Hamas disputes over hundreds of political detainees jailed in the two territories. Progress on this track could determine whether such a deal could hold.

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