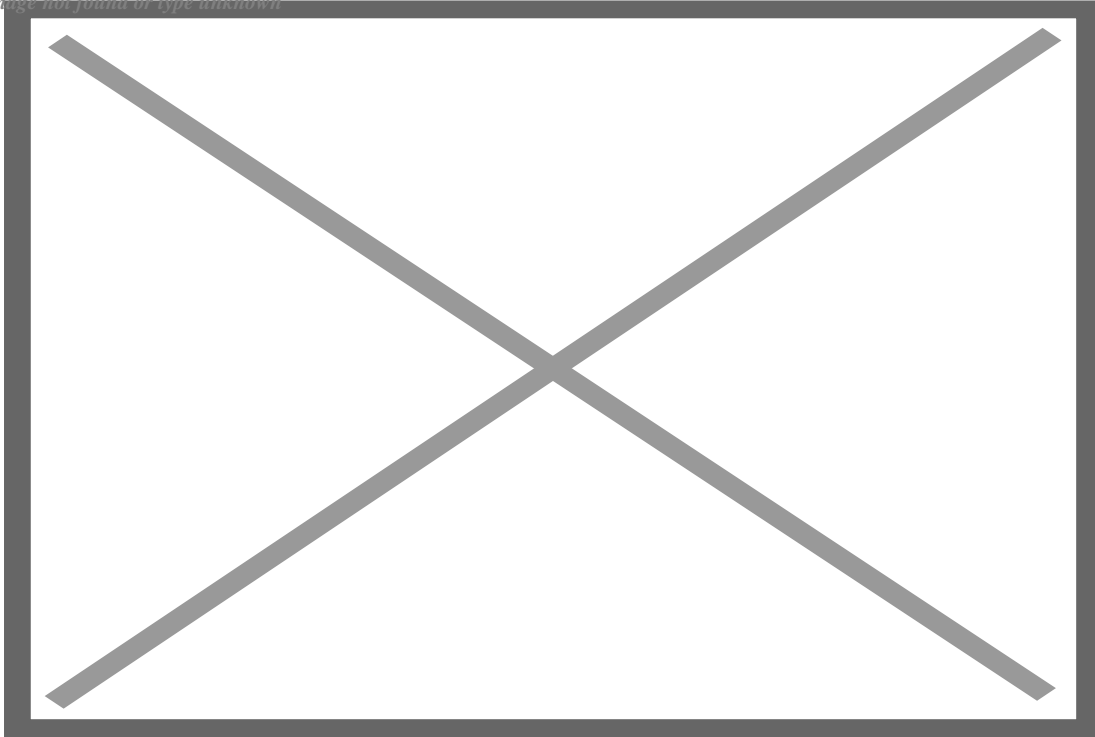


Palestinian rival governments form reconciliation committee

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Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (right) and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh (left) -- pictured here at a 2012 meeting in Cairo -- met in Egypt for talks on a Palestinian reconciliation deal [File: Mohamed Hams/EPA Handout]

Cairo, July 30 (RHC)-- Rival Palestinian political leaders meeting in Egypt have decided to form a committee on intra-Palestinian reconciliation. President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh met for rare face-to-face talks on Sunday in the coastal city of El Alamein along with representatives of most Palestinian political factions.

The latest attempt at reconciliation aims to bridge the gap between the parallel governments of Hamas in the blockaded Gaza Strip and of the Palestinian Authority – controlled by Abbas’s Fatah movement – which administers Palestinian-run areas of the occupied West Bank.

“I consider today’s meeting of the general secretaries of the Palestinian factions a first and important step in continuing our dialogue, which we hope will achieve the desired goals as soon as possible,” Abbas said

in a statement after the meeting.

The 87-year-old president announced “the formation of a committee to continue the dialogue ... end divisions and achieve Palestinian national unity.” “We must return to a single state, a single system, a single law and a single legitimate army,” Abbas added.

Earlier on Sunday, Haniyeh called on Abbas to end “security collaboration” with Israel and “political arrests,” according to participants at the meeting. The Hamas leader also said “a new, inclusive parliament must be formed on the basis of free democratic elections.”

Hamas won the Palestinians’ last legislative elections in 2006, but became the de facto ruler in the Gaza Strip a year later after wresting control from Fatah, which had attempted a pre-emptive coup to replace the Hamas-led government. Several weeks of violent fighting followed, resulting in Hamas ruling over the coastal enclave while Fatah – the dominant party in the Palestinian Authority – exercises limited self-rule in the occupied West Bank.

A later statement from Abbas said he “hopes for an upcoming meeting soon in Egypt to announce to our people the end” of the 17-year split “and the return to Palestinian national unity.”

Sunday’s meeting came amid a resurgence of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly in the West Bank, which Israel has occupied since the 1967 Middle East war.

More than 200 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces this year alone. Officials have warned that 2023 is on track to be the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since the United Nations began keeping track of fatalities in 2005.

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