

Moscow Welcomes Palestinian Unity

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Palestinians celebrating the reconciliation deal between Fatah and Hamas in the West Bank city of Nablus. **Nasser Ishtayeh**

Russia has welcomed the reconciliation between the two main Palestinian factions, saying a unified administration of the West Bank and Gaza Strip will help promote a peace settlement with Israel.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who also heads the secular Fatah faction, and Khalid Mashaal, leader of the Islamic Hamas movement, concluded the agreement Wednesday in Cairo, ending a four-year schism. Abbas said Palestinian reconciliation is critical to his bid for statehood.

"We welcome the signing of this agreement," the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement posted on its web site late Wednesday. "Palestinian reconciliation will consolidate the mandate of Abbas's internationally recognized leadership to conduct full and equal dialogue with Israel."

The agreement, brokered by Egypt, calls for establishment of a joint government in the West Bank and Gaza, with elections to be held within a year. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu dismissed the accord, telling reporters in London last night that it was a blow to peace and a victory for terrorism.

Hamas has not participated in peace talks with the Jewish state, which it refuses to recognize. Hamas is considered a terrorist organization by the United States, European Union and Israel. Fatah seeks a negotiated peace agreement with Israel leading to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem.

The United States has said it may reconsider aid to the Palestinians should the reconciliation lead to a government that flouts conditions for a peace agreement with Israel, including the Jewish state's right to exist.

The division between Abbas' Fatah movement and Hamas dates to 2007, when Hamas ousted Abbas' forces from Gaza a year after winning parliamentary elections, ending a partnership government and leaving Abbas in control of only the West Bank.

The Middle East peace Quartet — the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia — says peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians are a priority as unrest sweeps through the Middle East. Negotiations stalled in September after Israel refused to extend a partial freeze on construction of West Bank settlements. Palestinians say they won't negotiate while building continues.

"The tense situation in the region means it is essential for all sides to seize this opportunity to reach a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians as soon as possible," the Foreign Ministry said.

President Dmitry Medvedev, on a visit to the West Bank city of Jericho in January, renewed Russia's call for a Middle East peace conference to be held in Moscow.

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