

Hamas looks to join PLO, marking major unification step

Head of terror group, which hasn't renounced violence, renews plea to be folded into Abbas-led Palestinian umbrella organization for first time

BY DOV LIEBER | November 2, 2016, 3:17 pm |



Khaled Mashaal, political leader of Hamas (left), meets with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in Cairo, Egypt, December 21, 2011. (photo credit: AP)

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Hamas chief Khaled Mashaal made a rare plea on Wednesday for uniting his popular Palestinian Islamist movement with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), bringing it, for the first time, into the umbrella group recognized internationally and by Israel as the representative of the Palestinians.

A senior PLO member told The Times of Israel that the group wants to bring Hamas under its framework, while an expert on Palestinian politics said the move was likely to take place.

The call by Hamas — considered a terror group by Israel, the US and most of the international community — for inclusion in the PLO comes amid concerted efforts by the Palestinians to challenge the 1917 British Balfour Declaration, which promised the Jewish people a “homeland” in Palestine, and to establish an independent Palestinian state as soon as possible.

Wednesday is the 99th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration.

Mashaal called for a “united authority for inside and outside of Palestine under the umbrella of the Palestinian Liberation Organization.”

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Hamis chief Khaled Mashaal waves to Hamas supporters during a rally to commemorate the group's 25th anniversary in Gaza city, Saturday, Dec. 8, 2012 (AP/Hatem Moussa)

"It is time we reconsider the organization [the PLO]," he said during a speech in Qatar broadcast live by Al Jazeera at the Fourth Palestinian National Security Conference, which took place in Gaza City.

In Fatah-Hamas unity deals in 2011 and 2014, the Islamist group agreed to join the PLO, but the agreements fell through. There was also a failed bid for Hamas to join the PLO in 2005.

"In order to build our lives and political system on democratic foundations, we must be partners in shouldering responsibility and partners in the decision of war and peace," Mashaal said.

The PLO, which has been the largest Palestinian umbrella organization since 1964, is headed by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and dominated by Abbas's Fatah party.

It also includes the left-wing factions the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), as well as other smaller factions.

While Abbas has said he is committed to a nonviolent and diplomatic strategy to establish a Palestinian state, Mashaal has made it clear that Hamas will not give up employing violence to force Israel's hand.

"The wager on the diplomatic movement on its own has been proven a failure. Let us agree on a national strategy and that everyone is with the [armed] resistance, which is a legitimate right that raises the cost of the occupation," Mashaal said.

His call for national unity followed a rare meeting he held with Abbas in Qatar on Thursday.



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Hamas has been in conflict with Abbas's Fatah movement, which runs the West Bank, since 2007, despite multiple attempts to broker reconciliation.

"We want all of the Palestinian factions, including Hamas, to be within the framework of the PLO," Wasel Abu Yousef, a member of the PLO Executive Committee, told The Times of Israel in a phone interview,

Asked about Mashaal's statement assuring that Hamas would continue its armed struggle, Abu Yousef said: "The type of struggle the Palestinians wage will be decided by the PLO. We agree on the basis that the Palestinian struggle will be a popular struggle."

Shaul Mishal, head of the Middle East program at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, said it was likely that Hamas would merge into the PLO.

"Both sides are looking to find a common denominator. They realize that to unite is the only effective way to be on the regional map, considering the harsh current events in the region," he said. "They [the Palestinians] cannot continue working on the bilateral approach with Israel," which has languished in the past several years.