

EX-GAZA CHIEF: HAMAS DEAL WILL OPEN BORDER

RAMALLAH: An exiled Palestinian politician who quietly negotiated a power-sharing deal for Gaza with former arch foe Hamas discussed the details for the first time in an interview, saying he expects it to lead to a swift opening of the blockaded territory's border with Egypt and an easing of crippling power outages. The Egypt-Gaza border crossing is expected to open by late August and funding has been secured for a \$100 million power plant, Mohammed Dahlan, a former Gaza security chief, told AP in a phone interview from the United Arab Emirates.

Dahlan said his chemistry with Gaza's newly elected Hamas chief, Yehiyeh Sinwar, helped forge the once unthinkable alliance. The two grew up in the tough streets of southern Gaza's Khan Younis refugee camp before joining rival camps, the Islamic militant Hamas and the mainstream Fatah movement, respectively. "We both realized it's time to find a way out" for Gaza, Dahlan, 55, said in an hour-long conversation Saturday. He said both sides had learned lessons from the destructive rivalries of the past.

The deal, backed by Egypt and the UAE, is still in the early stages of implementation. There are no guarantees of success, but all involved seem to benefit. It enables Egypt to contain Hamas, the militants on its doorstep, through new security arrangements. Dahlan has a chance to return to Palestinian politics. And cash-strapped Hamas can prolong its rule through the promised border opening.

If it goes ahead, the deal could deliver a crushing blow to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who presides over autonomous enclaves in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Abbas has a toxic relationship with Hamas, which seized Gaza from him in 2007, and with Dahlan, a former top aide he sent packing in 2010. A Hamas-Dahlan alliance would further sideline the 82-year-old Western-backed Abbas and undercut his claim that he represents all Palestinians.

Mini-state

The objectives of the Dahlan-Hamas deal - ending the border blockade, reviving Gaza's battered economy - could also weaken Palestinian statehood aspirations by creating a "mini-state" in Gaza. For more than two decades, Palestinian leaders, including Abbas, have unsuccessfully sought to establish a state in the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem in negotiations with Israel. Israel, which captured those territories

in the 1967 Mideast war, withdrew from Gaza in 2005, but keeps a tight grip on the rest.

The territories sit on opposite sides of Israel which has deepened the geographic separation with strict travel bans. Dahlan dismissed concerns that his deal with Hamas will gradually turn Gaza into a separate entity. "We are patriots, not separatists," he said, adding that he would do everything in his power to prevent a further drifting apart of the Palestinian territories.

The multi-millionaire with far-flung business interests in the region and close ties to leaders of Egypt and the UAE said he no longer aspires to replace Abbas. "I have no ambitions to be president," he said. "Maybe that was the case when I was younger, but now I see the situation. ... Seventy percent of the land is in the hands of the Israelis, and they have no intentions to give us a state."

Dahlan said the new deal is meant to revive Palestinian political institutions that have been paralyzed since the 2007 split between Hamas and Fatah. This would include a new attempt to form a national unity government and revive parliament. Dahlan said Abbas is welcome to lead such efforts, but that "we are not going to wait for him forever" to make a move. Previous Abbas-led efforts to form a unity government with Hamas backing have failed over the years, with both sides ultimately refusing to give up power in their respective territories.

Egypt's blessing

In recent weeks, Abbas took a different approach, stepping up financial pressure on Gaza to force Hamas to cede ground there. Azzam Al-Ahmed, an Abbas aide who negotiated with Hamas in the past, said yesterday that the Dahlan-Hamas understandings "are going nowhere". He said Abbas' Palestinian Authority supports Gaza with \$1.2 billion every year, covering wages of ex-loyalists, social welfare payments and electricity. He suggested Dahlan and Hamas would be unable to cover such sums.

Ahmed also said Egypt assured Abbas "that they are not going to help any new entity in Gaza". However, the lengthy negotiations between Dahlan's representatives and a Hamas team in Cairo last month would not have been possible without Egypt's blessing, participants said. Dahlan presented an upbeat vision of Gaza, a crowded sliver of land on the



A Palestinian boy runs for cover from tear gas during clashes between demonstrators and Israeli security forces at the Qalandiya checkpoint between Ramallah and Jerusalem in the occupied West Bank yesterday as crowds protest against new Israeli security measures implemented at Al-Aqsa mosque complex. — AP

Mediterranean with 2 million people.

He said he has raised funds to refurbish Gaza's gate to the world, the Rafah crossing with Egypt, and that he received Egyptian assurances that the crossing will open by the end of August. "Everyone who needs to travel will be able to travel," he said. Over the past decade, Rafah only opened sporadically because of the blockade, and thousands of Gazans are currently on waiting lists, hoping to travel abroad for study, work or medical care.

The UAE has promised \$100 million for a power plant that would be built on the Egyptian side of the border, Dahlan said. Once the exact location is chosen, construction would take 18 months, he said. In recent years, Gazans have endured blockade-linked rolling power cuts, most recently of as long as 20 hours a day. Egypt has been sending fuel to Gaza's existing power plant in recent weeks, as part of the understandings.

Hamas role

Hamas officials describing the deal have said their group will remain in charge of security in Gaza. Dahlan is to raise money and advocate for Gaza abroad. He hasn't been back to Gaza since the Hamas takeover in 2007. In the months preceding the takeover, he had led Fatah forces in Gaza street battles with Hamas, and grievances of families of close to 400 people killed in the fighting - from both sides - still haven't been addressed.

Disbursements to the families from a multi-million-dollar UAE-backed compensation fund are to begin soon, in an attempt to buy calm that is in line with tribal traditions. Several dozen of Dahlan's lieutenants and key supporters are expected to return from exile as part of the arrangements. Dahlan said he will remain in exile. "It's better for Gaza that I stay in the diaspora and approach everyone who can extend a helping hand to Gaza," he said. — AP

MP PROPOSES AMENDMENTS TO PENAL CODE

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Kandari said he backs a motion calling to hold an emergency session of the Assembly to discuss the implications of the escape of the cell members and also bilateral relations with Iran. Kuwait expelled around 15 Iranian diplomats from the country following the court ruling in protest against Iranian involvement in the case. The Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM) has called for holding to account all those who helped the cell members to flee the country.

Meanwhile, the government has informed the Assembly of its rejection of a draft law regulating con-

flict of interests, which has been under study by the legal and legislative committee, on grounds that its provisions already exist in other legislation. The government told the Assembly committee that the objectives of the law are achieved through the presence of similar provisions in other laws, and accordingly there is no need to duplicate the laws.

Separately, MP Faisal Al-Kandari, a member of the Assembly's investigation panel, denied yesterday that the Kuwaiti health office in Germany had dealings with an Israeli company. The story was reported yesterday in a local daily. Kandari said the health office has never dealt with brokers or any other companies, adding that an investigation is still going on.

BIBI FACES PRESSURE OVER AQSA SITE AFTER...

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in the field," he said at the start of the meeting. "We are receiving from them an up-to-date picture of the situation, as well as recommendations for action, and we will decide accordingly."

Israeli Major General Yoav Mordechai - head of COGAT, the defense ministry agency responsible for civilian affairs in the Palestinian territories - signaled changes to the policy were possible. "We are examining other options and alternatives that will ensure security," Mordechai said in an interview with Al-Jazeera. Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, who has announced he was freezing contacts with Israel over the dispute, said yesterday this included the security coordination that has been credited with preventing wider unrest in recent years. "They must know that they will be the main losers because we play an important role in assuring our security and theirs," Abbas said.

The crisis has resonated internationally. The UN Security Council will hold closed-door talks today about the spiraling violence. Arab League chief Ahmed Abul Gheit yesterday accused Israel of "playing with fire" with the new security measures, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called them an insult to the Muslim world. Pope Francis said he was following events with concern and urged dialogue and moderation.

Tensions have risen throughout the past week over the metal detectors at the compound, which includes the revered Al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock, following the July 14 attack that killed two policemen. Palestinians view the move as Israel asserting further control over the site. They have refused to enter the compound in protest and have prayed in the streets outside. Israeli authorities say the July 14 attackers smuggled guns into the site and emerged from it to shoot the officers.

Friday's main weekly Muslim prayers - which typically draw thousands to Al-Aqsa - brought the situation to a boil. In anticipation of protests, Israel barred men under 50 from entering the Old City for prayers.

Clashes broke out between Israeli security forces and Palestinians around the Old City, in other parts of annexed east Jerusalem and in the occupied West Bank, leaving three Palestinians dead. On Friday evening, a Palestinian broke into a home in a Jewish settlement in the West Bank during a Sabbath dinner and stabbed four Israelis, killing three.

The Israeli army said the 19-year-old Palestinian had spoken in a Facebook post of the holy site and of dying as a martyr. On Saturday, Palestinian youths hurled stones and petrol bombs as the army used a bulldozer to close off the attacker's West Bank village and prepare his house for demolition. Netanyahu said yesterday the demolition would go ahead "as soon as possible". Israel frequently razes or seals attackers' homes as a deterrent, although rights groups say this amounts to collective punishment. Clashes also flared in east Jerusalem and other Palestinian villages in the West Bank near Jerusalem on Saturday, police said. Two Palestinians died, including one when a petrol bomb exploded prematurely.

Israeli security forces said yesterday they had arrested 25 men active in the militant Hamas group that rules the Gaza Strip. The arrests throughout the West Bank included "senior members", a statement from the Shin Bet internal security agency said, and was part of preventive measures in the wake of "the tensions around the Temple Mount". Also yesterday, a rocket fired at Israel from Gaza hit an open area, the Israeli army said, causing no injuries. No Palestinian group claimed the attack.

The holy site in Jerusalem has served as a rallying cry for Palestinians. In 2000, then Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon's visit to the compound helped ignite the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, which lasted more than four years. The Haram Al-Sharif is central to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is in east Jerusalem, seized by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War and later annexed in a move never recognized by the international community. Considered the third holiest site in Islam, it is the most sacred for Jews. — AFP

ERDOGAN VISITS KUWAIT, SAUDI ARABIA...

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including the Syria conflict where both are staunch foes of President Bashar Al-Assad. Turkey is also setting up a military base in Qatar, its only such outpost in the region. It has expedited the process since the crisis began and reportedly now has 150 troops there. "From the first moments of the Qatar crisis, we have been on the side of peace, stability, solidarity and dialogue," said Erdogan. But Turkey, which is also going through a turbulent time with the European Union and the United States, also does not want to wreck its own relations with regional kingpin Saudi Arabia.

"As the elder statesman in the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia has a big role to play in solving the crisis," said Erdogan, taking care not to explicitly criticize the kingdom. Erdogan said he supported the mediation efforts of Kuwait's Amir, a possible indication Ankara sees Kuwait as the key to solving the crisis. The Qatari emir said Friday he was ready for talks to resolve the row as long as the emirate's sovereignty is respected. His call received a cold reception from the UAE's state minister for foreign affairs,

Anwar Gargash, who said he hoped the emir had pledged to reconsider Qatar's position. "Dialogue is necessary, but it should be based on a revision" of Qatar's stance, he tweeted.

Erdogan is likely to get a warm welcome in Doha where Turkey has been loudly applauded for sending in food, including fruit, dairy and poultry products by ship and by plane to help Doha beat an embargo. Turkey has also benefited, with its exports to Qatar doubling in the past month to more than \$50 million. According to the economy ministry, Ankara has sent around 200 cargo planes filled with aid since the crisis began.

Erdogan's tour coincides with a visit to Kuwait by the EU foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini, who held talks yesterday with Kuwaiti officials. A statement said Mogherini paid tribute to Kuwait's "relentless mediation efforts" in the dispute and called for a resolution "through dialogue and without delay". Rights group AFD International called yesterday for an end to the "blockade" of Qatar, warning that the regional boycott has led to "forced separation" of families. — Agencies

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