

New Palestinian Cabinet likely to succeed

JERUSALEM – A Catholic Palestinian legislator praised the new Palestinian Cabinet and said it was likely to succeed.

“This is a good start,” said Bernard Sabella, a Fatah member of the Palestinian Parliament. “In effect it is a government which combines the more practical and pragmatic elements of Fatah, the independents and second-rank Hamas” members. Fatah and Hamas are Palestinian political factions with radical members and representation in government.

Sabella said the Cabinet, or new unity government, had “almost unanimous” support from Parliament, an indication the political factions wanted an end to the violent infighting.

Fatah and Hamas in mid-March concluded months of negotiations – during which their armed factions also clashed in the streets of Gaza and the West Bank, leaving dozens dead and many more injured. Parliament approved the 25-member Cabinet, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas swore in the members.

Israel quickly called for the international boycott of the Palestinian government to continue and said the new government still failed to recognize Israel’s right to exist or to condemn violence against Israel. After a Hamas government was elected more than a year ago, the international community boycotted the Palestinian territories, which caused havoc in the economy and prevented thousands of civil servants from getting paid.

The Palestinian government has pledged to honor previous agreements between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

The Ha’aretz daily newspaper said in a column that the government was the “last nail in the Fatah coffin” and that Fatah now has become the closet ally of Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, a member of Hamas.

Sabella said, “Hopefully the money will come in, irrespective of the Israeli position.”

He said it is “very clear” to all parties involved, including Hamas, that “unless we deal practically and pragmatically with our Israeli neighbors, we can’t go forward.”

The United Nations said it was encouraged by the formation of the new government, and Norway was the first country to officially recognize it.

Great Britain also expressed a willingness to be flexible with the government, but the United States said it would continue with the boycott.

Sabella said he doesn’t expect Israel or the United States to immediately recognize the new government, but he does expect other governments to take the necessary steps.

“My advice to the U.S. is to wait and see before adopting a final position,” he said. “There should be more flexibility shown by Washington and Tel Aviv in terms of dealing with the new government.”

According to Israel Radio, 60 percent of Israeli respondents in a poll believe Israel should talk to the new Palestinian government.

Nadia Hilou, a legislator in Israel and Catholic Arab member of the Labor Party, urged the Israeli government to “find a way” to begin discussions with the new Palestinian government.

“We have to start creating an element of dialogue,” she said. “I suggested we don’t miss this opportunity. Here is the moment. ... There are divisions, there will always be, but who said it would be easy? It is hard.”

Hilou said there is no magic trick which will bring talks without Hamas’ acceptance of Israel.

But, she said, “I believe that with the process will come the recognition.”

Meanwhile, Sabella said, both the Israelis and Palestinians must now focus on reinforcing a more “peace-oriented environment.”

One move would be the joint release of prisoners by both sides, he said. Hundreds of Palestinians are in Israeli jails and the Palestinians are still holding an Israeli soldier kidnapped last summer on the Israeli border with Gaza.

“People speak openly of releasing prisoners,” said Sabella. “This can happen and it should happen. As we prepare to organize our house internally, we need to send a signal to Israel that this is a government interested in making peace not war.”