

Lone Christian in Palestinian cabinet quits after violence: Factional fighting prompts tourism minister's resignation

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The only Christian cabinet member in the Palestinian government headed by the Islamist Hamas movement has quit his post because of growing factional violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"I confirm to you that I have resigned from the government due to the violence that has occurred in the Gaza Strip," Judeh Murqos said in a statement after sending a letter of resignation June 12 to Palestinian prime minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas.

Murqos's resignation as tourism minister was issued after Hamas militants fired rocket-propelled grenades into a security headquarters linked to the Fatah movement of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas in the southern Gaza Strip city of Rafah.

Supporters of Fatah and Hamas are locked in a power struggle over control of the Palestinian Authority and its security forces, following the sweeping victory of Hamas in Palestinian legislative elections in January.

Residents in Bethlehem said they believed Murqos quit the post because gunmen from the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, an armed group linked to Fatah, had intimidated him by coming to his house at night and firing volleys of bullets into the air. Fatah gunmen have recently begun to assert themselves in the West Bank in response to shows of force by Hamas in its power base in the Gaza Strip.

"Some gunmen showed up at his residence during the night, and he felt it wasn't worth it," a Bethlehem resident told ENI, speaking on condition of anonymity. The London-based *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper reported that Murqos and his son had

also received death threats.

Murqos, an engineer for the Bethlehem municipality for about 25 years, was chosen for the post of tourism minister after Hamas failed to convince prominent Christian leaders to accept the post in its new government.

Christians have traditionally held the tourism portfolio in the Palestinian government because Bethlehem, the town of Jesus' birth, is the main tourist attraction in the Palestinian territories. -*Michelle Green, Ecumenical News International*