

Tough Choices on Hamas Prompt Arab Disarray

by [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](#), [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](#)

Jan 27, 2009

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](#)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross fellow in the Geduld Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](#)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



Brief Analysis

Arab support for the Palestinians has been the bedrock of Arab diplomacy for decades, but the recent Israeli military action against Hamas fighters in the Gaza Strip has divided those backing Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah Party and those supporting its Hamas rival. A series of meetings before and after the January 18 unilateral Israeli ceasefire could mark the beginning of significant changes in Arab diplomacy concerning the Palestinians. Arab attitudes toward the emerging threat of a nuclear-armed Iran are also in flux.

Background

The recent diplomatic maneuvering was marked by drama and near farce. An effort by the small Persian Gulf state Qatar to hold a summit of all Arab states and Iran, as well as Syria-based Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, was challenged by Saudi Arabia, which attempted to host its own gathering. Instead, on January 19, a long-scheduled Arab economic meeting in Kuwait was transformed into a full-scale Arab summit.

Historically, Arab summits are dominated by Egypt, the oldest Arab state, and Saudi Arabia, the self-proclaimed leader of the Islamic world and, by virtue of its huge oil reserves, the richest Arab state. But this order has been challenged by tiny, gas-rich Qatar, hugely wealthy in per capita terms, and by Syria, regional troublemaker and close ally of (non-Arab) Iran. A surprise reconciliation lunch hosted by Saudi King Abdullah for his ally President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and his antagonists Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani of Qatar and President Bashar al-Asad of Syria broke the deadlock. Even so, the summit ended with scant mention of the Gaza crisis and Hamas in the final communique.

Saudi Arabia versus Syria

Since the breakdown of the 2000 Camp David peace talks between Israel and the PA, Arab leaders have differed over how to deal with the Palestinian issue. In one camp, Syria supports "resistance" activities of the Iranian-backed groups Hizballah and Hamas. In the other, U.S. allies Saudi Arabia and Egypt support the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative -- a Saudi proposal calling for a full Israeli withdrawal from lands it occupied in 1967 and an "agreed" resolution of the refugee issue in exchange for full Arab recognition of and normalization of ties with Israel.

Divisions between the two camps widened following the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik al-Hariri, a dual Saudi-Lebanese citizen and the kingdom's chief supporter in Lebanon. In the aftermath of the slaying, Saudi Arabia and Egypt led a diplomatic boycott of Damascus, a leading suspect in the murder.

Relations deteriorated following Israel's 2006 war with Lebanon's Shiite Hizballah. Syria supported Hizballah, while moderate Arab states were critical of the militia for instigating the conflict through the abduction of two Israeli soldiers. Angered by their failure to support Hizballah, Syrian president al-Asad branded moderate Arab leaders as "half-men" with "half-positions" on confronting Israel.

In a bid to rein in Syrian and Iranian influence following Hamas's victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections, Saudi Arabia brokered a power-sharing accord in Mecca between Fatah and Hamas in February 2007. To cement the deal, Saudi Arabia invited President al-Asad to the March 2007 "Arab Solidarity Summit" in Riyadh. While the summit began with photos of King Abdullah and al-Asad walking together, holding hands, it ended in discord when al-Asad tried to add new language to the Arab Peace Initiative. Three months later, in June 2007, Hamas seized power in Gaza through armed force.

Tensions between Riyadh and Damascus worsened over the standoff to select a new Lebanese president, ending in Hizballah's May 2008 temporary armed takeover of West Beirut. Adding insult to Riyadh's injury, Qatar's Sheikh Hamad brokered a deal to elect a Lebanese president and to ensure a "blocking third" of opposition ministers in the ruling cabinet (effectively giving them a veto), solving the Lebanese standoff on Hizballah and Syria's terms.

Summit Results

Despite the kisses and handholding at the Kuwait summit, the diplomatic game apparently continues. Qatar was probably encouraged by the near success of the meeting it organized in Doha -- thirteen Arab heads of state were present, just one short of a quorum, plus Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad. That meeting's final communique called for Arab countries to "suspend the Arab Peace Initiative" and to "cease all forms of normalization with Israel, including a reconsideration of diplomatic and economic relations." Indeed, Qatar closed the Israeli trade mission in Doha, and Mauritania broke relations with Israel.

King Abdullah's threat to withdraw his peace plan is probably an attempt to avoid being outflanked by other Arab rulers. In his tough speech to the Kuwait meeting (carried on the website of the Saudi embassy in Japan), Abdullah, perceived in the West as a moderate, referred to the "treacherous Israeli enemy" and the "genocide [in Gaza]" being carried out by "a criminal, inhuman, and merciless gang." The king added "The murderers and their supporters forgot that the Torah said 'an eye for an eye'; the Torah did not say 'an eye for the eyes of a whole town.'" He ended by pledging \$1 billion to rebuild Gaza (although the record of Arab pledges to actual payouts is spotty).

The spirit of compromise displayed by the Arab rivals at their luncheon was not matched by their respective delegations, which were left to write the final communique. According to various diplomatic and media reports, differences arose after Qatar and Syria pushed for reference to the Doha communique's call to suspend the Arab Peace Initiative and an unconditional opening of all crossings into Gaza (perhaps under Turkish and European Union monitoring). Saudi Arabia and Egypt vehemently opposed the Doha language, and instead demanded references to the Egyptian initiative to end violence in Gaza in which the PA would man Gaza's crossings. Equally controversial were disagreements over whether Arab assistance to Gaza would be delivered through Hamas or the PA.

U.S. Policy

The turmoil in Arab diplomacy presents both challenges and opportunities for the United States. On Gaza, Washington should continue to support the Egyptian initiative, which calls for the monitoring of Gaza crossings by the PA and greater Egyptian and international efforts to shut down tunnel smuggling networks. The United States should also work to ensure that Arab aid is delivered via the PA, allowing Hamas to gain as little credit as possible during reconstruction. The Saudi-authored Arab Peace Initiative could still provide a diplomatic building block in the peace process, but was already suffering from a lack of Saudi commitment to propel it forward despite recent Israeli interest in its proposals.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia are Washington's strongest Arab allies, but both Mubarak and Abdullah are old men, and the leadership transition in both countries could be problematic. Having the status of these leaders challenged by other countries does not help. Of the main antagonists Syria and Qatar, each presents a different problem. While the United States, at least under the Bush administration, was determined to curtail the influence of Syria, particularly in Lebanon, Qatar is an ally, providing air-base facilities and storage sites for military equipment.

Qatar's diplomatic stance has long been complex, as it tries to balance ties with the United States and Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. Despite what often appears as deliberate provocation, Washington will most likely be careful not to irritate Qatar. Worryingly though, the Qataris appear to have concluded that the U.S. status in the region is declining while Iran's is ascending, and that Tehran therefore should be accommodated as necessary.

Andrew J. Tabler is Soref fellow at the Washington Institute. Simon Henderson is Baker fellow and director of the Institute's [Gulf and Energy program](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=23&newActiveSubNav=Gulf%20and%20Energy%20Policy&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D23&newActiveNav=researchAreas) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=23&newActiveSubNav=Gulf%20and%20Energy%20Policy&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D23&newActiveNav=researchAreas>)



Policy #1465

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](#)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)