

The Mecca Accord (Part I): The Victory of Unity over Progress

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Brief Analysis

This is the first of a two-part examination of the meaning and implications of the Mecca accord. [Read part two \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2565\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2565).

The Fatah-Hamas agreement mediated by the Saudis last week in Mecca revives a long tradition in Palestinian politics of prioritizing internal unity over progress toward strategic objectives. With Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas compromising on almost every critical issue to reach accord with the leadership of Hamas, the agreement blurs the distinction between moderate and extremist in the Palestinian camp and poses a direct challenge to advocates of the thesis that the contest between those two poles is the defining feature of the current Middle East landscape.

The Road to Mecca

After Abbas nominated Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh to form a PA cabinet last February, the international community's response was unusually swift and decisive. Despite having raised no formal objection to Hamas's participation in Palestinian legislative elections, the Quartet -- the United States, European Union, Russia and the UN -- suspended direct aid to the Hamas-led PA government and conditioned its renewal on the government's approval of three conditions: formal recognition of Israel, renunciation of violence and terrorism, and commitment to implementation of existing Israeli-Palestinian agreements. For its part, Israel participated in the international financial boycott of the PA government by withholding the transfer of tax revenues collected by Israeli customs authorities and national insurance institutions. After several months, the Quartet adopted a plan to relieve financial pressure on certain segments of the Palestinian population by channeling funding through specialized international agencies and nongovernmental institutions. While this had the unintended effect of reducing the squeeze on the Hamas-led government, popular protests by key constituencies suggested that the policy of financial isolation was beginning to show signs of success. (Indeed, advocates of the policy of isolating Hamas financially should not have been surprised by the rise in Hamas-Fatah tensions; such tensions were the logical outcome of that policy).

In recent weeks, rising pressures have spilled over into open, armed conflict between Hamas and Fatah, with violence that more accurately resembles gang warfare (drive-by shooting, kidnappings, etc) than it does civil war. By

last week, 130 Palestinians had been killed in internecine fighting, which has reportedly gripped Palestinian society with a Baghdad- and Beirut-like sense of fear and foreboding. The political complement to these armed clashes has been an on-again/off-again pattern of showdown and retreat between Abbas and Hamas. In recent weeks, Abbas has at times threatened the Samson-like option of bringing down both his own presidency and the Hamas government by calling new presidential and legislative elections, only to follow up such threats with repeated offers to go anywhere - - Cairo, Damascus, now Mecca -- to reach a new understanding with Hamas that would end internal fighting and break the wall of international isolation around the PA government. For its part, Hamas has remained remarkably resolute, offering no substantial concessions to achieve these two goals.

Abbas's decision to reach an accord with Hamas rather than face Hamas in an electoral showdown is especially puzzling given that it comes at a moment when both the United States and Israel are pursuing risky political moves to revive the dormant Israeli-Palestinian peace process and strengthen Abbas's own position vis-a-vis Hamas. On the political front, this includes a U.S. commitment, evinced in word and deed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, to invest political capital in defining a "political horizon" for Palestinians, an initiative which could only be made possible by a generous Israeli interpretation of the terms of the Roadmap to allow for negotiations over the shape of a permanent status agreement (the third phase of the Roadmap) before an effort had even been made to dismantle terrorist infrastructure (the first phase of the Roadmap). In terms of the real-life battle between Abbas and Hamas that seemed to be raging in the streets of Gaza and the West Bank, Washington and Jerusalem put their money where their mouths were with an \$86 million commitment by the United States to bolster security forces controlled by Abbas and a \$100 million transfer of blocked tax revenues from Israel to Abbas-controlled accounts.

Inside the Mecca Accord

Against this backdrop, and after the failure of previous attempts by Egypt and Syria to mediate a Fatah-Hamas agreement, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia invited all the key leaders -- for Fatah, Abbas and a team that included leading Fatah strongman Muhammad Dahlan; for Hamas, Haniyeh and Hamas political bureau chief Khaled Mashal - - for negotiations in Mecca. After two days of talks, greased with the promise of massive Saudi financial assistance, the delegations reached an agreement, part of which is contained in a Fatah-Hamas accord and part in a new letter from Abbas to Haniyeh, in which the PA president asked the Hamas leader to form a new government. Piecing together these two documents, the key terms are as follows:

- Agreement to forswear violence as a tool to settle Hamas-Fatah disagreements and "to stress the importance of national unity as the basis for . . . confronting the occupation."
- Agreement on the composition of a "national unity government" to be headed by Haniyeh that would include eleven additional ministers nominated by Hamas; eight ministers nominated by Fatah; and one minister allotted to each of the other four political parties represented in the Palestinian Legislative Council. One of the Fatah appointees will be independent Ziyad Abu Amr to serve as foreign minister. By consensus, former finance minister Salaam Fayyad will return to that position. The interior minister, who will be an "independent" appointed by Hamas and approved by Fatah, has still not been named.
- Agreement to speed internal reforms within the Palestine Liberation Organization that will, for the first time, bring Hamas into the PLO and even award it a major role in the PLO's governance and leadership. The PLO, it is important to recall, still remains the official Palestinian representative in peace talks with Israel and other international diplomacy.

In addition to the distribution of ministries, the other main issue to occupy negotiators was the wording of a paragraph in Abbas's letter to Haniyeh that was supposed to address the Quartet's conditions. The full text of that paragraph is as follows:

"Third, I call upon you as prime minister of the next government to abide by the interests of the Palestinian people and to preserve their rights and maintain their accomplishments and develop them and work on achieving their national goals as ratified by the resolutions of the Palestinian National Council meetings and the Basic Law articles and the national conciliation document and Arab summit resolutions and, based on all this, I call upon you to respect the Arab and international legitimacy resolutions and agreements signed by the PLO."

As both Hamas and Fatah officials have made clear in recent days, nothing in the accord can be viewed as addressing the first two of the Quartet's conditions (recognition of Israel and renunciation of violence) and only through a tortuous interpretation of the final clause can even a loose connection be made to the third condition (accepting previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements). Neither "Israel," nor "peace process," nor "political horizon," nor even the word "peace" itself can be found. Not only is there a huge difference between "respecting" a resolution and agreeing to be bound by it, but because Abbas failed specifically to cite which Palestinian, Arab, and UN resolutions he asked Haniyeh to "respect," the Hamas leader could pick and choose from those he likes and those he dislikes. This critical paragraph is, in other words, worse than meaningless -- it is actually tantamount to a license for Hamas to interpret its political program as it sees fit, drawing on its own selective reading of the diplomatic history of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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