

# The Mecca Agreement between Hamas and Fatah: What Should We Expect?

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The Mecca agreement, signed between rival Palestinian groups, Hamas and Fatah on February 8, under the auspices of the Saudi leadership, was welcomed by thousands of cheering Palestinians throughout the Occupied Territories, and seen as the closing of a chapter of a bloody and tumultuous period of their history. Officially, although more subtly, there is an equal eagerness to bring a halt to an oppressive command of economic and diplomatic sanctions that have rendered most Palestinians unemployed and living well below the poverty line.

In fact, almost all Palestinians want to remember, if they must, the bloody clashes that claimed the lives of over 90 people since December as a distant memory, a bitter deviation from a norm of unity and national cohesion, according to which they want their struggle to be remembered.

Diplomatically, aides to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah, and advisors to Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh are fanning out across the globe, each group heading to its traditional political milieus: the former group to Western Europe and the United States, and the latter to Middle Eastern and Islamic countries. Both Fatah and Hamas are keen to demonstrate that by endorsing the agreement, their fundamental position remains unchanged, an arduous task indeed.

The official reactions to the agreement, emanating from the four corners of the globe are hardly encouraging. The so-called Middle East Quartet – consisting of the United States, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia – although they welcomed the agreement, hoping that it might produce the desired ‘calm’, reiterated their conditions that must be unreservedly ratified by the Palestinian government if the sanctions are to be lifted; these conditions are the recognition of Israel, the renouncing of violence and the acceptance of past agreements signed between both parties, namely the Oslo Accords.

Though the Quartet is seen to have withheld its final judgement on whether the formulation of the unity government constitutes an acceptance, either directly or by implication of its three conditions, Israel is embarking on its own diplomatic campaign to heighten pressure. Israeli Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni, who was recently in Munich to attend a global security conference, has reportedly met EU’s defence and security coordinator Javier Solana, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and foreign ministers of Austria, Sweden and other countries. She has also spoken to US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice twice over the phone, as reported in the Israeli daily Haaretz. Her phone diplomacy has also reached Germany, Britain and Norway. Livni’s behavior is but a mere expression of the attitude that

is currently being developed in Israel; the international community must continue to pressure Palestinians until the three conditions are satisfied in full from an Israeli point of view.

The main predicament to the Israeli quest, however, is the same old dilemma: Palestinians can never, under any circumstance and no matter how great concessions are; meet Israeli expectations, for these expectations are crafted in so clever a way that makes it practically impossible for any Palestinian leader or government to comply. Neither late President Yasser Arafat, who wore an Israeli flag pin side by side with a Palestinian one on his Khaki jacket managed to live up to Israel's seemingly 'reasonable' demands, nor did his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, who was ironically elevated in his political relevance to become the darling of Israel and Washington when Hamas swept the majority of the vote in the legislative elections of January 2006, which subsequently led to the devastating sanctions. The Israeli government labelled Abbas 'weak' and 'indecisive'. He too, by the same standards, was not able to meet Israel's conditions, why should we expect Hamas or any other to do so?

The practical Israeli position - as opposed to rhetorical - is rather clear and should not involve any exaggerated analysis: let Palestinians continue to be collectively punished, succumb to internal feuds and dwell in their limitless misery to allow Israel the needed time to further consolidate its territorial schemes in the West Bank and occupied Jerusalem: locking up more Palestinian communities in Bantustan-like localities, while Jewish settlements continue to be conveniently linked up to so-called "Israel proper" using the pretext of security and the mammoth and encroaching imprisonment wall as the means to such an end.

The Mecca agreement's import stems from whether it will present Israel with the opportunity to discredit Palestinians' intentions, thus prolong the international sanctions and internal chaos. Interestingly, these two points are also the core of the Palestinians' efforts, who hope that the agreement, in which Hamas commits to 'abide' by past agreements signed by the PLO and Israel, is sufficient to end the effective state of chaos in the Occupied Territories and convince the international community that enough concessions have been made and that time has arrived for the sanctions to be lifted.

This is likely to be the Israeli and Palestinian quest for the next few weeks, especially as the final judgment on the Mecca agreement is likely to be pronounced after two significant meetings: a tripartite summit that would bring together Rice, Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Monday, February 19, and two days later, a crucial meeting in Berlin of the Quartet's ministers.

Evidently, the US final position is expected to be slightly amended, if not a carbonic copy of that of Israel; no surprises there since President Bush's administration foolishly amalgamated its Middle East policy with Israel's self-serving national and regional agenda. But one must not be too hasty as to make such a determination without consulting the significance of the place in which the agreement was signed: Saudi Arabia.

There is no doubt that the Saudi position has finally revitalized the role of Arab states in regional conflicts (the Mecca agreement was signed after incessant talks between Fatah and Hamas in Egypt and Jordan). London-based Saudi analyst Mai Yamani suggests that the Mecca agreement is an attempt to quell Iran's growing influence in the region. "Iran has been financing Hamas, while the Saudis in the last few months even refused to meet

( Hamas Prime Minister Ismail ) Haniyeh. They realised that if there is more chaos in the Palestinian territories Iran will have more influence.”

If that assessment is accurate, partly or entirely, and considering the US’ own endeavours to undermine Iran’s strategic outreach in the region, it might indeed be rational for the US to live with the Mecca agreement and deal with the ‘moderate’ elements within the Palestinian government, even if temporarily. Yet again, the US hardly behaves in accordance with its own interests in the Middle East if such attitudes run counter to Israel’s own regional designs.

The next a few weeks will reveal the potency of the Mecca agreement, as opposing interpretations of what it in fact means and how such meaning should be implemented will determine the next step for all parties involved. Its failure, however, which remains a dreadful possibility, shall have detrimental affects on the Palestinian people, any prospect for their coveted future unity and will further undermine their national agenda for years to come.

*Ramzy Baroud’s latest book, The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People’s Struggle (Pluto Press), is available at Amazon.com and also from the University of Michigan Press. Baroud is a veteran journalist and a human rights advocate at a London-based NGO; he is the editor of [www.PalestineChronicle.com](http://www.PalestineChronicle.com); his website is [www.ramzybaroud.net](http://www.ramzybaroud.net)*

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