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The Mecca Accord (Part II): Implications for Arabs, Israel, and U.S. Policy

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This is the second of a two-part examination of the meaning and implications of the Mecca accord.
[Read part one](#) .

The Fatah-Hamas unity agreement reached in Mecca last week has powerful implications for all regional players. The most serious challenge it poses is to U.S. diplomacy.

Arab Winners and Losers

It is apparent from a reading of the key Mecca documents that the unity accord was only made possible by Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas's decision to compromise, not by concessions from Hamas. There are four possible explanations for Abbas's actions: (1) he looked at the correlation of forces between Hamas and Fatah and reasoned that Hamas was so powerful that he and his allies could not win a political showdown, even with the active support of Israel and the United States, and therefore hoped to buy time for Fatah's rehabilitation; (2) he was so appalled at the prospect of intra-Palestinian violence and the prospect of civil war that he decided to pay a stiff price for internal peace; (3) he believed that the cover of a unity government may provide him with the protection to pursue U.S.-backed diplomacy with Israel that will, eventually, allow him to turn on his new Hamas partners; or (4) he is not nearly as committed to a permanent peace agreement with Israel, reached through peaceful means, as his reputation has led observers to believe. (A recent hate-filled speech by Abbas, in which he praises such Palestinian "martyrs" as former Islamic Jihad chief Fathi Shiqaqi, lends tragic credence to this latter view.) While each is possible, none -- not even the most optimistic scenario, option number three -- instills hope and confidence in Abbas's strategic vision and leadership skills.

Hamas clearly emerges strengthened by the Mecca accord. In exchange for some flexibility on naming ministerial portfolios and a vaguely worded statement about "respect[ing]" unspecified resolutions and agreements, Hamas received a huge political boost in the form of an embrace by both Abbas and the Saudi leadership. Indeed, just days after Fatah loyalists lobbed one of the worst epithets in the region's political lexicon at the Sunni extremists of Hamas during a major West Bank demonstration -- calling them "Shiites" -- Abbas allowed himself to be pictured along with Hamas leader Khaled Mashal and PA prime minister Ismail Haniyeh wearing nothing but pure cotton cloth performing Muslim ritual ablutions in Mecca. For Abbas, who was once accused of being a secret Bahai, itself a cardinal offense in the Sunni world, this was the twenty-first century equivalent of Henry IV's "Paris is worth a mass" volte-face.

Among Arab countries, the main winner from the Mecca deal is Saudi Arabia. Whether or not the kingdom survives the vicissitudes of Palestinian politics, merely engineering the Hamas-Fatah accord shows that Riyadh could succeed in significant regional diplomacy where two other Arab powers -- Cairo and Damascus -- could not. To a certain extent, the Saudis were default mediators: Hamas has consistently sought to embarrass Egypt, refusing to buckle under pressure to release abducted Israeli Cpl. Gilad Shalit, whereas

Abbas knew that striking a deal under Syrian auspices would add insult to American injury. Nevertheless, the Saudis will now bask in the glow of inter-Arab peacemaking. If Americans cry foul at Saudi efforts to legitimate Hamas -- and so far, the Quartet (the United States, European Union, Russia, and the UN) has actually welcomed, not criticized, Saudi efforts -- Riyadh will claim that its mediation prevented Iran from gaining deeper inroads among Palestinian radicals. It is unclear whether King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia was actually animated by the strategic imperative to rally Sunni Arabs of all political stripes to confound Iranian schemes to extend Shiite influence throughout the Sunni Arab world or was merely moved to action by distasteful images of Palestinians killing Palestinians. What is clear, though, is that the Saudi "achievement" at Mecca came at the expense of legitimizing a radical organization that couldn't even specifically endorse the Saudi peace plan.

A second Arab winner in the Mecca deal is Syria. Palestinian political unity means that the chances have dimmed for diplomatic progress on the Palestinian track; Damascus will view this as a net positive, because it means there may be an opportunity to stoke interest in reviving the Syrian track. But if the past is prologue, the Syrians are not likely to take advantage of their own good fortune by making their offer to negotiate with Israel more attractive. Instead, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad is likely to undermine his own position by taking steps -- such as issuing bellicose statements, delivering dangerous weapons to Hizballah, or extending operational aid to some radical terrorist organization -- that makes it impossible for the Israeli government to consider this option.

Among Arab countries, the major losers from the Hamas-Fatah accord are Egypt and Jordan. In recent months, Cairo has been subject to a bout of national self-doubt, based on its inability to throw its traditional weight around in inter-Arab issues. Egypt's embarrassing failure to arrange a Hamas-Fatah accord will feed the growing sense around the region that the Egyptian emperor has no clothes. When Egypt looks for new opportunities to exert influence, as is likely, Washington needs to ensure that Egyptian ambitions are directed in a positive direction (such as leading Arab support to promote stability in Iraq) and that Egypt doesn't compete for the radical share of the Arab popularity market (such as investing in an "Arab nuclear option" to counter the Iranian nuclear program).

But whereas Egypt may suffer psychological fallout from the Saudi success, Jordan may be on the verge of a major strategic setback. King Abdullah II, after all, has argued that failure to achieve Israeli-Palestinian peace within the coming period may mean that prospects for peace will never be realized -- and there can be no doubt that Hamas-Fatah accord certainly set back whatever hopes for diplomatic progress may have existed. One implication is that some in Israel are likely to give a second look to the policy of unilateral withdrawal, which Jordanians view with dread because it is likely to create a West Bank vacuum that Hamas will fill. Even if Israel does not go down that route, which has been discredited inside Israel by the rise of Hizballah and Hamas following withdrawals in Lebanon and Gaza, the strengthening of Hamas at the expense of Abbas can only have the effect of emboldening Jordan's own "Hamas-wing" of the Islamic Action Front inside the Hashemite kingdom.

Israel: Back to February 2006?

In Israel, the political echelon seems to be unsure of its response to the Mecca accord. At his weekly cabinet meeting yesterday, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said his government "neither accepts nor rejects" the accord, which seemed not to keep pace with the fact that some key governments, such as France and Russia, had already reacted positively to the idea of including Hamas in regional diplomacy. For Israel, critical decisions need to be made, such as the continuation of financial and security support to Abbas. In essence, Israel finds itself today in exactly the same situation it was in exactly a year ago, when Abbas first appointed Haniyeh to serve as prime minister. At the time, Olmert, Tzipi Livni and other leaders of the Kadima party said the right approach for Israel was to see no distinction between Abbas and Haniyeh, a position that evolved considerably over time. Returning to that position today will require an abrupt shift in Israeli diplomacy, which can only be achieved in full coordination with the United States.

Dilemmas for Washington

The Mecca accord presents the United States with more serious dilemmas than any other party. At the two ends of the spectrum, Washington's options are as follows:

- to declare that Mecca has erased any distinction between moderate and radical in the Palestinian camp, suspend all efforts at direct assistance to Abbas, withdraw Gen. Keith Dayton's security assistance team, and curtail efforts to negotiate an Israeli-Palestinian "political horizon."
- to consider Mecca a purely internal, and quite insignificant, intra-Palestinian affair that has no bearing either on existing international conditions for a renewal of aid to the PA, which still stand, or on diplomatic efforts to pursue Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy, which would go forward. In other words, the United States could behave as if the Mecca accord were irrelevant.

The Bush administration is unlikely to want to pursue either route to its logical conclusion. It would prefer not to take a public position against Palestinian unity, even if such unity comes at the price of progress toward peace. Yet it surely realizes that, with Mecca, the sun has set on the pursuit of a "political horizon."

To complicate matters even further, this setback to one key initiative advanced by the administration comes at a time when another key U.S.-backed initiative -- UN Security Council Resolution 1701, the Lebanon ceasefire accord -- is under pressure as well. Here, the problem is repeated reports of substantial efforts by Syria to transfer weapons to Hizballah in direct contravention of the resolution. Last week, for example, German media reported the transfer of one hundred containers of Russian-made antitank weapons from Syria to Hizballah, under the watchful gaze of Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers. Israeli defense minister Amir Peretz has publicly warned that, given the ineffectiveness of international guarantees preventing Hizballah's resupply, Israel may have to take its own action.

Collectively, these setbacks suggest that the Bush administration needs to revisit some of its key presumptions about the potential for stability and progress on various Arab-Israeli fronts and what is necessary to achieve them. Before taking further incremental steps on either the Palestinian or the Lebanese front, it is essential for Washington to reach strategic understandings with two players -- the Israelis and the Saudis -- on the direction of policy. With both Jerusalem and Riyadh, there are obvious tensions that need to be addressed. The Hamas issue is central: Strategically, both Israel and Saudi Arabia support the idea of Sunni cooperation to counter the rise of Iranian influence but tactically, they differ as to whether Hamas is part of the problem or part of the solution. In this context, did the Saudis purposefully "disrespect" the United States in mediating the Mecca Accord or could they possibly have believed that Washington was neutral or even supportive of an agreement that may have failed on the scorecard of the Quartet's conditions but that may ostensibly have succeeded in separating Hamas from its Iranian backers?

In this context, Washington might explore whether the potential exists for Israel and Saudi Arabia to engage more publicly in their own diplomacy. Given the limits on what can be achieved between Israelis and Palestinians after Mecca, expanding the orbit of regional diplomacy may make sense, especially if the Saudis are interested in arguing that Mecca not only ends Palestinian infighting but actually contributes to regional security. Since both Israelis and Saudis say they are keen to prevent the spread of Iranian influence in the Levant, the two sides would seem to have much to talk about, not least of which is a practical implementation plan for the eventual all-Arab recognition of Israel, the cornerstone of the Saudi peace initiative. This would, in essence, be the negotiation of an Arab Roadmap that would complement the existing Quartet Roadmap and would provide Israel with a countervailing set of incentives to those that the pursuit of a "political horizon" provides for Palestinians. There are many potential formats for this sort of engagement -- and there is a precedent: Saudi participation at the mother of all peace conferences in Madrid in 1991.

Dealing with regional diplomacy is no substitute for addressing the Mecca accord itself. Here, there is no avoiding the fact that while the United States welcomes Sunni Arab cooperation to counter rising Iranian

influence, it cannot countenance the legitimization of an unreformed extremist organization like Hamas. It might have been a close call if Hamas had grudgingly uttered a formula close to the Quartet's conditions, but Hamas won the brass ring without having to compromise. In this regard, and in the absence of some other attractive regional option to occupy diplomacy, U.S. policy should reconsider the original intent of President Bush's landmark 2002 Rose Garden address, delivered with then-National Security Advisor Rice at his side: "I call on the Palestinian people to elect new leaders, leaders not compromised by terror. I call upon them to build a practicing democracy, based on tolerance and liberty. If the Palestinian people actively pursue these goals, America and the world will actively support their efforts. . . . And when the Palestinian people have new leaders, new institutions, and new security arrangements with their neighbors, the United States of America will support the creation of a Palestinian state whose borders and certain aspects of its sovereignty will be provisional until resolved as part of a final settlement in the Middle East."

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