

THE PALESTINIANS

THE FATAH~HAMAS DEAL IN MECCA

FEB 9, 07. After failure to form a unity government over the past year, Palestinian leaders finally clinched a deal in Mecca. The agreement included a promise by Hamas to “respect” previous peace agreements with Israel.

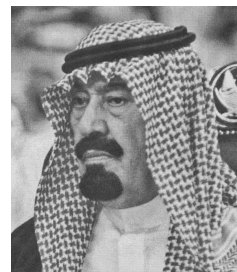
But there was no mention made of the other two international demands, that any PA government, including one controlled by Hamas, must formally **recognize the State of Israel and renounce terrorism**. Hamas has adamantly refused to comply with both.

It was agreed, among other things, that President Mahmoud Abbas will lead negotiations with Israel, and that the Hamas government’s special security force will be integrated into the authority’s security forces, which are affiliated with Fatah.

The “respect” for the previously signed agreements, was a “great compromise” for Hamas.

The back down by Abbas, who had previously said he would never agree to a unity government unless Hamas accepted the conditions set by the Quartet - EU, US, UN and Russia - was an even greater compromise.

But Abbas said the agreement would “satisfy our people...and bring us to the shores of peace... This initiative has been crowned with success.”



THE BILLION DOLLAR CARROT

Saudi Arabian King Abdullah played a pivotal role in clinching the accord. After a year of escalating Palestinian infighting which left hundreds dead and hundreds wounded, Abdullah ordered both parties, Fatah and Hamas, to come to Mecca to work out their differences. It was an order the cash-strapped Palestinians could not refuse.

When the talks stalled over the wording of the Mecca Agreement, King Abdullah stepped in to help resolve the issues. PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas finally signed the deal with Damascus-based Hamas chief Khalid Mashaal.

President Abbas, Hamas politburo chief Khalid Mashaal, and Palestinian PM Ismail Haniya, left Mecca with a pledge of \$US1 billion from Saudi’s King Abdullah.

THE COMPOSITION OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT

Powerbrokers linked to Fatah will now take key cabinet positions in the Palestinian cabinet. But Hamas will still hold majority control in the government.

Hamas will fill nine government portfolios - endowments, economy, labor, local governance, sports and youth, communication, justice and education.

Fatah will have six portfolios - health, social welfare, public works, transportation, agriculture and prisoners' affairs.

Four other parties will have one portfolio each - tourism, information, women's affairs and culture.

"Independents" are supposed to take the key jobs of finance, foreign affairs and the interior.

It is not clear yet who will head the key interior ministry which controls the PA security forces. A Hamas official told reporters that Abbas "will choose an independent interior minister from among five names that will be submitted to him by Hamas."

The reconciliation accord stipulates that Ismail Haniyeh will retain his position as prime minister. (But he has to wait for Mashaal to give a green light before going ahead with any major moves.) The Fatah group will name a deputy PM.



President Abbas called on Haniyeh to form a new government, saying, "I call upon you to respect international resolutions and the agreements signed by the Palestine Liberation Organization."

BACK FROM THE BRINK

The agreement, reached on Feb 8, has brought Palestinian society back from the brink of civil war. Palestinians hope that as well as bringing a halt to the fighting, the deal will bring an end to a year-long international embargo against the Hamas government.

In the short term, at least, the agreement is seen by the Palestinians as a major achievement. For the first time in weeks, weapons in the Gaza Strip were fired into the sky in celebration instead of at each other.

There were jubilant scenes as people took to the streets to cheer the signing of the deal. People in cars waved the flags of both Hamas and Fatah, while some set off fireworks and celebratory gunfire.

But as the deal does not meet international demands for recognition of Israel and renunciation of violence, it may not lift the international boycott on funding that had, prior to Hamas becoming the government in early 2006, provided a lifeline to the Palestinian Authority.

The Palestinian leaders are banking on the concessions in the accord being enough to convince international backers to renew aid flows and deal with the administration. And they are already explaining that they have satisfied the demand for recognition of Israel by signing peace deals sanctioned by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation in the 1990s.

But Hamas was never a signatory to the Oslo accord. Over the past year, Hamas has ardently rejected pressure from donor countries to recognise Israel, and under this new deal, Hamas has not been forced to change its position.

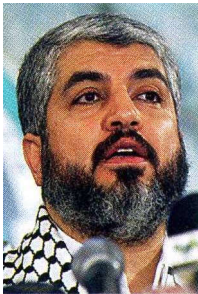
The Mecca Agreement brings a fragile peace between Fatah and Hamas, but how long it will last is on many observers' minds. And the agreement will do nothing to promote peace with Israel.

If Hamas and the Palestinians were willing to live in peace with Israel, there would be a real cause for celebration. Israel would recognise the new government, and another \$US500 million would soon flow to the Palestinian Authority — the proceeds of tax and customs duties which were withheld since Hamas was elected in January last year. And a billion Euros would also flow from Europe into the Palestinian coffers.

“We expect the international community to stick to its own requirements that were stated after the elections which Hamas won,” said Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni.

WHAT LEADERS ARE SAYING

KHALID MASHAAL has called for violence to stop immediately, describing the factional fighting and unrest in the Palestinian territories as “dark days.”



“It is our turn to make this agreement work and to make this agreement stick, to build our Palestinian house on strong foundations,” he said.

Mr Mashaal pledged that the agreement would not be broken. “I tell those who fear that the fate of this agreement will be the same fate of the old ones, we have pledged our allegiance to God from this sacred place ... and we will go back to our country fully committed to it,” he said after emerging from the meeting room, which overlooked Islam’s most holy site, the Black Rock of the Kaba’a.

He said that the international community “must respect our accord, recognize our Palestinian reality and deal with it seriously.”



MAHMOUD ABBAS said: “Recent days have been very black and may God not allow them to return. It has been a catastrophe that must not be repeated. We don’t want blood spilt.”

Mr Abbas urged the new government to “respect” previous accords signed between the Palestinians and Israel.

ISRAEL: Government spokeswoman Miri Eisin said the conditions for an end to the freeze had not changed. “Israel expects a new Palestinian government to respect and accept all three of the international community principles - recognition of Israel, acceptance of all former agreements and renunciation of all terror and violence.”

Israel’s Minister for Strategic Affairs **Avigdor Lieberman** (Yisrael Beiteinu party) said that the proper response to the PA unity government is an **Israeli national unity government**.



Lieberman has set up meetings with all of Israel’s right-wing and religious parties for the coming week to discuss such a possibility. He says Israel needs to be unified and strong in the face of the possibility that the Palestinian Authority, still ruled by Hamas, will now gain international acceptance and support due to the Mecca Agreement.

BRITAIN: Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett was hopeful, saying “We welcome the ongoing efforts to end the violence and promote intra-Palestinian reconciliation.”

USA: State Department Spokesman Tom Casey stood by American demands that the PA fulfil the Quartet’s requirements. Casey told reporters that any new PA government must recognize Israel, renounce violence against Israel and abide by previous agreements.

A spokesman told the BBC that Washington remained committed to President Bush’s vision of two democratic states - Israel and Palestine - living side by side, and that the Palestinian people deserved a government that could pursue that goal.