

February 6, 2007

## Feuding Palestinian Leaders Hold Talks in Mecca

By [HASSAN M. FATAH](#)

MECCA, Saudi Arabia, Feb. 6 — Leaders of the two main Palestinian factions,  [Hamas](#) and Fatah, on Tuesday began a two-day Saudi-brokered effort to agree on a unity government that could end a wave of violence in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and resume relations with donor countries.

The Palestinian president, [Mahmoud Abbas](#) of Fatah, and two Hamas leaders — Ismail Haniya, the Palestinian prime minister, and Khaled Meshal, the Damascus-based militant leader — met separately with King Abdullah, Saudi officials said.

All of the leaders are expected to perform the pilgrimage at the Grand Mosque in Mecca and meet with other Saudi officials and mediators before deliberations begin in earnest here on Wednesday.

The meeting is intended to yield a government that would include members of both parties and be acceptable to Western governments so that they resume relations with the Palestinians and restore financial aid. Such a government might be able to restart peace negotiations with the Israelis, which have been stalled since 2003.

The United States and the [European Union](#) consider Hamas, which has carried out numerous attacks against Israeli civilians and opposes Israel's existence, to be a terrorist organization. They cut off aid to the [Palestinian Authority](#) a year ago when Hamas took power after defeating Fatah in elections.

Previous efforts to stem the current bloodshed between the two Palestinian factions and find common ground have yielded only temporary cease-fires. But many hope that the high-profile meeting in Islam's holiest city, and the weight and personal prestige invested in it by King Abdullah, will prod the Palestinians to leave here with an agreement in hand.

“Hopefully, in the holy environment in the house of God, this will come clearly as a message to them and they will take their obligations as seriously as they can,” the Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, said Tuesday in an interview.

Hamas and Fatah have wrangled over a unity government since last summer, when it became clear that with Western aid withheld, Hamas could not govern alone.

Prime Minister [Ehud Olmert](#) of Israel told visiting American Jewish leaders on Tuesday that he would meet on Feb. 19 with Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) and Mr. Abbas. Mr. Olmert did not say where the meeting would take place.

The issues separating Hamas and Fatah in the Saudi-sponsored talks are how to divide ministerial portfolios and how the new government will meet the Western criteria of renouncing violence, recognizing

Israel and accepting previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements.

American and Israeli officials said Tuesday that the so-called Quartet — the United States, the European Union, Russia and the [United Nations](#) — would not compromise on those demands.

If there is a deal in Mecca, Prince Saud said, “you move to the peace process — then you will be able to, with assurance, have the talks between the two sides.”

The Saudi effort to forge peace between the warring Palestinian factions reflects a general agreement among leaders in the Arab world that a big contribution toward bringing stability to the Middle East is resolving the Palestinian conflict.

The Saudis, who have usually preferred to work quietly behind the scenes, have grown increasingly alarmed at the chaos engulfing the region and have stepped forward to try to use their religious credibility, and vast oil wealth, to try to preserve the status quo and serve as a counterpoint to Iran’s growing influence.

Prince Saud said his country had always been involved in regional diplomacy, but more recently had moved with more urgency.

The kingdom has grown concerned over the rise in sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shiite Muslims — which he said has been driven by the bloodshed in Iraq. It is fearful of a civil war in Lebanon, and he suggested that the kingdom was looking to limit Iran’s involvement in Arab affairs.

The Saudis, he said, view resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as the key to stability — a position shared by Egypt, Jordan and the other Gulf states.

“I think that is of general acceptance now, that this conflict is impacting every other conflict,” he said.

During her visit to the region last month, Ms. Rice called for discussions on larger issues, including a “political horizon” for the establishment of a Palestinian state. Such issues could be raised at the coming meeting with Mr. Olmert and Mr. Abbas, but progress will be difficult. The Israelis and Palestinians have not held full-fledged peace talks for six years, and the two sides have been unable to meet their obligations under the first phase of the road map, the peace plan that was introduced and quickly stalled in 2003.

*Michael Slackman and Rasheed Abou al-Samh contributed reporting from Jidda, Saudi Arabia, and Greg Myre from Jerusalem.*

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)