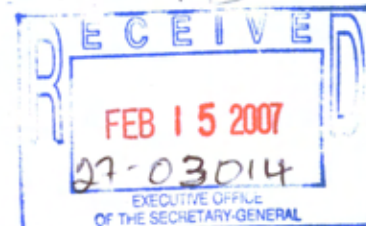


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Middle East Q**U.S./MIDDLE EAST PROJECT****FAX TRANSMISSION COVER SHEET**

Date: February 15, 2007
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I am pleased to share with you Mr. Siegman's op-ed that appeared in the February 14 edition of the *International Herald Tribune*.

Regards,

Gail Israelson
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INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

Mecca opens the way for Europe

Henry Siegman

Wednesday, February 14, 2007

PARIS

The recent agreement in Mecca between Fatah and Hamas demonstrates the fallacy of a widely held belief — that the United States alone holds the key to resolving the Israel- Palestine conflict. In fact, the Saudi-sponsored accord opens the door to a major European role in the Middle East peace effort. The question is whether Europe will walk through that door.

Although Hamas has committed itself to “respect” previous agreements between the PLO and Israel, it is not yet clear whether the Mecca accord obligates Hamas to explicitly recognize Israel. What is clear is that if Hamas and Fatah implement the agreement, form a unity government and return the rule of law to Gaza and the West Bank, they will have withdrawn from the brink of a Palestinian civil war that would have ended for the foreseeable future remaining prospects for a peace process and Palestinian statehood. That is a major achievement for which Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah deserves great credit.

What made this achievement possible was the realization not only by Hamas, but by Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas and King Abdullah as well, that no matter how far Hamas might go in meeting the conditions called for by the so-called Quartet — the United Nations, the European Union, Russia and the United States — Israel has no intention of returning to the 1967 border, and the United States has no intention of making the Israelis do so.

There had been at least a theoretical plausibility to the notion that if Abbas could prove that the moderation he exemplifies yields major improvements in the lives of Palestinians, he might have been able to prevail over Hamas. But Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his government not only failed to make such improvements, despite repeated promises to do so, but humiliated Abbas and destroyed what credibility he had by pressing him to play the role of a Palestinian Pétain who accepts Israeli money and arms in order to kill fellow Palestinians. And the Bush administration has done nothing to press Israel to deliver on its commitments, beyond Washington's empty rhetoric about a two-state “political horizon.”

Every time there emerged the slightest hint that the United States may finally engage seriously in a political process, Elliott Abrams, who handles the peace-process portfolio for the White House, would meet secretly with Olmert's envoys in Europe or elsewhere to reassure them there exists no such danger.

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Now that even Abbas has come to understand the irrelevance of the U.S. role to any possible advancement of the peace effort, the question is whether Europe can disengage from its subservience to Washington on this issue and undertake a constructive initiative of its own. And if the European Union cannot do it, can a coalition of European countries do so?

The Europeans should announce immediately the end of their boycott of Hamas and open a dialogue with a new unity government on conditions that would enable them to end sanctions imposed by the Quartet on the Palestinian Authority. These conditions should recognize that Hamas should not be asked to do that which the international community is not prepared to ask of Israel. Hamas should be asked to declare its willingness to recognize Israel if and when Israel declares its recognition of Palestinian rights within the pre-1967 border.

A Palestinian government that receives substantial Saudi financing is less dependent on the European Union than it was before the Mecca agreement. But there is no question that European economic assistance, which undoubtedly would be followed by wider international support, remains a powerful inducement for Palestinian diplomacy. In the aftermath of Saudi Arabia's breaking of the taboo against support of a government that includes Hamas, it should not require all that much courage to follow in King Abdullah's footsteps. And given U.S. dependence on the support of moderate Arab regimes in confronting Iran and in dealing with its troubles in Iraq, it is not at all unimaginable that such a European initiative will sooner or later bring the United States along in its wake.

Europeans need to be reminded of the basis for such an initiative. In March 2004, the presidents of EU countries unanimously declared their intention not to recognize deviations from the 1967 border that are not the result of a negotiated agreement. This is the time to act on that resolution.

Henry Siegman is director of the U.S./Middle East Project and a visiting professor at the Sir Joseph Hotung Middle East Program at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. These views are his own.