

Israel threatens to ignore Abbas

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AMMAN, Jordan - Israel said Tuesday it would stop dealing with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas if he goes ahead with plans to join Hamas in a new government, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Arab allies sought a way to break the Hamas logjam and push forward the stalled peace process.

Jordan's King Abdullah II, after separate meetings with Rice and Abbas, urged the United States to continue seeking to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord. But Israel said it would stop dealing with Abbas on larger peace issues if he went ahead and formed the coalition government with Hamas.

After the meetings Abbas acknowledged for the first time that sessions on Monday in Jerusalem with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Rice had been "tense and difficult" but said "it was not a failure and it will be followed by other meetings."

Abbas said Israel may have "misunderstood" the agreement reached in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, between his moderate Fatah faction and the militant Hamas group, according to Jordan's official Petra news agency.

"We told Israel that this agreement was made to protect the unity of the Palestinian people and its national interests," Abbas was quoted as saying. "The agreement is an expression of support for Palestinian interests, but Israel may have misunderstood it."

But in Israel, Miri Eisin, spokeswoman for Olmert, ruled out any talks on a final peace deal with Abbas if he went ahead with plans to form a new Cabinet including Hamas.

Israeli talks with Abbas would be limited to matters such as improving living conditions for the Palestinians and ending Palestinian attacks against Israel. "We're not talking about negotiations on final status issues," Eisin said.

The planned Palestinian coalition government fell far short of what the United States and Israel wanted, and also disappointed Sunni Arab states - many of them U.S. allies - that had hoped Hamas would soften anti-Israeli policies enough to satisfy the West and restart the flow of vital international aid.

Rice invited security and intelligence chiefs from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates to Amman for the talks to ask their advice on what, if anything, can be done further to persuade Hamas to back down.

Tuesday's session at the government security headquarters in Amman included some of the region's wildest and best-connected heavies, fixers and go-betweens, including Saudi national security adviser Prince Bandar bin Sultan and Egyptian intelligence head Omar Suleiman.

Suleiman has deep ties across Palestinian politics, including with Hamas. Rice has been meeting with him regularly since Hamas won Palestinian parliamentary elections 13 months ago.

Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Emirates have all, in turn, tried their hand in recent months at convincing Hamas to moderate enough to meet Western conditions, with little success.

Rice and Abbas both met with Abdullah but their sessions were separate. Both were reporting on progress from their three-way summit Monday with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. For Abbas, that meant explaining that he had failed to persuade Israel and Rice that the incoming Palestinian government would fulfill conditions for the restoration of foreign aid.

Abdullah and other Sunni Arab allies have strongly urged the Bush administration to energize peace efforts between Israel and the Palestinians, partly to improve the Palestinians' lot, partly to tamp down Islamic extremism that those government see as a threat and partly to counter the influence of Shiite Iran.

After the meetings, Abdullah issued a statement saying, "The longer the time passes without a framework that would help Palestinians and Israelis move forward, the greater the risk of an escalation of tensions."

Abbas also was headed to Germany along with stops in Britain and France in a campaign to convince skeptical Western leaders that the deal he forged earlier this month with the ruling Islamic Hamas reflects his moderate stand.

At stake is about \$1 billion in foreign aid for the Palestinian government cut off after Hamas defeated Abbas' secular Fatah party and took power last year. Abbas was elected separately and retains power, but the two-headed government structure was unwieldy and unable to deliver services or security.

Israel, the U.S. and the European Union label Hamas, which is committed to Israel's destruction and has killed hundreds of people in suicide attacks, a terror group.

The U.S. and European Union insist that any Palestinian government must recognize Israel, renounce violence and accept past peace accords. Hamas has rejected those conditions. The unity accord pledges only to "respect" past agreements.