

Abbas and Saudi king to discuss Hamas crisis

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Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas will visit Saudi Arabia on Tuesday and tell King Abdullah that he still backs a Saudi-sponsored power-sharing deal with Hamas provided it cedes control of the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian ambassador in Riyadh said on Sunday.

Abbas will tell the monarch that "the Mecca agreement which he personally sponsored is still a valid way out of the tense situation in the Palestinian territories, on condition that the situation in Gaza returns to what it was" before Hamas seized power in mid-June, Jamal al-Shobaki told AFP.

Shobaki made his remarks after the official SPA news agency announced that Abbas would hold talks with Abdullah in the Red Sea city of Jeddah on Tuesday.

The Mecca agreement reached under Saudi auspices last February between Abbas's Fatah and the Islamist militant Hamas led to a short-lived unity government between the rival factions.

Abbas dismissed the Hamas-led government after the Islamists forcibly took control of Gaza, and he then appointed a new government based in the West Bank.

Shobaki said Abbas will also brief Saudi leaders on preparations for an international Middle East peace conference called by US President George W. Bush for later this year.

The Western-backed Abbas has repeatedly said he firmly opposes any dialogue with Hamas until it returns the Gaza Strip to his authority.

SPA said the Saudi-Palestinian talks will cover "ways of boosting bilateral links" and "developments on the Palestinian scene."

Shobaki said he believed a clause should be introduced in the Mecca accord voicing "respect for the Arab peace initiative" revived at an Arab summit in Riyadh in March.

He was referring to a five-year-old Saudi-authored blueprint which offers Israel peace and normal ties if it withdraws from all land seized in the 1967 Middle East war and allows the creation of a Palestinian state and return of Palestinian refugees.

Oil powerhouse Saudi Arabia, a key regional ally of the United States, has welcomed Bush's peace push, saying it contains elements compatible with the Arab peace plan.

Washington called for the peace conference to jumpstart Israeli-Palestinian talks and boost Abbas against Hamas, which has been shunned by the West since sweeping January 2006 parliamentary elections for refusing to recognise Israel and renounce violence.