

From Crawford to Gaza: Countdown to Disengagement

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Policy #500

April 18, 2005

On April 7, 2005, Dennis Ross, Michael Herzog, and David Makovsky addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Ambassador Ross is the Institute's counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow, former U.S. Middle East peace envoy, and author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004). Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Brig.-Gen. Herzog, a visiting military fellow at the Institute, was formerly the senior military aide to the defense minister and a peace negotiator. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks; David Makovsky's remarks served as the basis for [PeaceWatch no. 498](#).

DENNIS ROSS

A recent trip to Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza showed me that the window of opportunity so eagerly welcomed only a few months ago may be closing. Israelis and Palestinians each think that the other side should act, and each also face serious internal dissent and unrest. Thus, the chances for significant bilateral coordination in the near future are slim. That said, several measures can be taken to avoid missing this opportunity completely.

First, the ceasefire must be secured. None of the top authorities on either side understands the precise terms of the agreement reached among the Palestinian factions in January 2005. One way to clarify this issue is for William "Kip" Ward, the U.S. Army general spearheading security coordination in the area, to become much more active. He should hold daily meetings with each party. He should also create a list of goals for Mahmoud Abbas to complete before his visit to Washington. As Fatah splinters between the old and young guard, inactivity on General Ward's part makes the risk clear: Hamas may become the strongest Palestinian faction. Within Fatah, the old guard has resisted Abbas and is threatening to throw its support behind Faruq Qadoumi for the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The agreement that created the Palestinian Authority (PA) designated the PLO as the more powerful organization, so a victory for Qadoumi would push Abbas out of the picture.

Second, the problem of the 495 Palestinians on Israel's wanted list must be seriously addressed. General Ward can be helpful on this front as well. He should examine Israel's requirements for lifting additional checkpoints in the West Bank. This would dramatically improve Palestinian freedom of movement, and Abbas could claim it as a success, strengthening him as he attempts to deal with the issue of Israel's wanted list.

Third, the European Union and the World Bank should create a team to help Abbas clean up the PA. If he cannot eradicate the PA's corruption-riddled reputation, he will never succeed domestically.

Fourth, the \$1.2 billion that the international community has pledged to the Palestinians must have tangible effects on the ground. One failure of the recent London Conference, at which the money was pledged, was that it did not spur the creation of specific projects. What is needed are more initiatives like the housing project financed by Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan of the United Arab Emirates, in which the pledged money is quickly turned into concrete accomplishments that increase Palestinian employment.

Fifth, the greatest threat facing both sides is violence supported by Hizballah and Iran. Hizballah should be pressed to follow through on its claim that it is remaking itself as a Lebanese political organization, rather than a militant group carrying out Iran's bidding. The Europeans should also make clear to Iran the consequences of Hizballah violence. British prime minister Tony Blair, who stated that the Arab-Israeli conflict is the most dangerous source of instability in the world, can help reduce this danger during ongoing British, French, and German negotiations with Iran.

Sixth, Arab states must bolster Abbas. American pressure on this subject is long overdue. Hamas can be counted on to remain calm until the parliamentary elections, scheduled for July. Therefore, this is the last chance to increase Abbas's domestic support. With Arab states publicly supporting him, Hamas would find an oppositionist stance increasingly costly. In short, coordination must begin sooner rather than later. If the international community—especially the United States, the European Union, and Arab states—does not throw its full support behind the process, the Gaza disengagement could fail, making any future cooperation that much more difficult.

MICHAEL HERZOG

The election of Mahmoud Abbas and the Egyptian-Israeli-Palestinian summit in Sharm al-Sheikh sparked optimism throughout the international community. In the intervening months, however, while other regional events captured international attention, events on the ground went somewhat off course with regard to the three major challenges facing Abbas: the need to stabilize and reorganize the Palestinian security situation; the need for institution building; and the need to plan toward, and coordinate, the upcoming Israeli disengagement from Gaza.

There is a widening expectations gap between Israelis and Palestinians. For example, Palestinians point to the Abbas-engineered cooling-down period as an example of a positive step on their part that needs to be reinforced by positive Israeli actions. Indeed, March 2005 was the first month since September 2000 in which no Israelis were killed, and terrorist activities have declined by 75 percent since January 2005. Yet, Israel remains concerned about security and refuses to jump headlong into resumed peace negotiations before terrorist infrastructure is dismantled. They point to the shakiness of the current lull, noting that Palestinian militant groups refer to it as only a *tahdiya*, or cool-down, rather than a full-scale *hudna*, or ceasefire. Israel is particularly concerned about the Palestinian security forces. Their reorganization has been delayed, and their current efforts to thwart terrorist activities are far from systematic. Moreover, the PA has not dealt with the 495 West Bank fugitives on Israel's wanted list, in spite of Israeli efforts to hand over security responsibility for West Bank cities. This gradual handover was based on a bilateral

understanding that the fugitives would be allowed to return to normal life if they laid down their arms and renounced further violence, but so far Abbas has only established a committee to negotiate with them. Meanwhile, terrorists are trying to improve the range and the accuracy of their Qassam rockets, and the Palestinian security forces are doing nothing to stop them. It seems that Abbas is acting only when he is challenged directly.

In the Palestinian political sphere, there has been little change in terms of reform and institution-building. The current belief is that Hamas could garner about 40 percent of the vote in the parliamentary elections scheduled for July 17, due to the general perception that it is free from the corruption that has riddled Fatah and the PA. Publicly, Abbas has not declared that he is concerned about this issue, but if Hamas succeeds in the elections, his maneuverability will be further limited. Hence, he may be reconsidering either the election date or the election law.

On the Israeli political scene, the planned disengagement from Gaza is the top priority. The removal of settlers will take one month, and the removal of military posts may take another month. Under this timetable, the disengagement would be completed at the beginning of October, right before the onset of the Jewish High Holidays. Once Prime Minister Ariel Sharon overcame all the political obstacles to disengagement, some settlers began negotiating with the government on relocation. Nevertheless, some violence is expected by those settlers who hope that a painful disengagement from Gaza will deter any future disengagement from the West Bank.

The Palestinians have adopted a somewhat wary stance with regard to coordinating the disengagement. Some, including Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei, have professed reluctance out of a fear of being complicit in a perceived Israeli plan of "Gaza First and Last." In light of this and other factors, active third-party involvement is warranted, lest the opportunity be lost.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Minda Lee Arrow.