

Saeb Erekat: The Friend, the Negotiator and the Politician

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



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Remembering the late Palestinian official's long institutional memory and wide-ranging role in decades of peace diplomacy.

Saeb Erekat leaves behind a complex legacy which I would divide into four parts. I knew him for about 27 years. The first legacy was Saeb, the person. I had so many conversations with him. I was convinced on a human level that he definitely wanted peace with Israel. He believed, even if the US was not involved, Israelis and Palestinians would have to find a way. He believed Jews and Arabs were destined to live together, and I believe this led him to have personal friendships with Israelis.

He was proud of his kids, who went on a summer program with Israeli kids. When I talked to him in Virginia just before his double lung transplant there, he said he wanted to do the surgery in Tel Aviv. He thought this would be a message of hope. I joked if he had Israeli lungs, he would be able to shout even louder!

The second legacy was Saeb, the negotiator. He could be tenacious and his style could be very strident, but I think he ultimately wanted a deal. Yet critically, he had a very keen sense of what politics would come to bear within his side, and he would not buck those above him who did not want to take the risk. This was clear in March 2014, when President Abbas did not respond to the offer put forward by President Obama. It was very regrettable that he never told his own people the truth about what the US offered. He could be a political infighter. If there was a backchannel and he was not a part of it, woe to the backchannel.

The third legacy was Saeb, the public figure. He did not have a base in his Fatah Party. To his credit, he was not corrupt. This was a testament to his character. Yet, it meant that he did not have the resources to build a political base within the Palestinian system.

At the same time, this meant he was more politically exposed than others. The net effect was that he didn't want to

be on the wrong side of people who thought he was too accommodating of Israel in the media. Instead, he made often baseless allegations about a massacre in Jenin during the Second Intifada, or that Israel was intentionally spreading Covid.

In the US and Europe, there is a division between the negotiator and the spokesman. However, Saeb did both. The Israeli public heard his remarks without knowing the other aspects of him, and this led them to question his credibility.

Finally, there is Saeb's institutional memory. He led Palestinian negotiations for so long; nobody in that system knows what he knew. His death is a loss for the Palestinian people. They lost someone who was a passionate advocate of the cause. Now a successor will need to see how they can take the recent developments in the Mideast involving Israel and the Gulf. The art will be to take what Palestinians consider a bypass road and turn it into a bridge for a better future for Palestinians and Israelis alike.

*David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, creator of the podcast [Decision Points \(https://shows.acast.com/decision-points/\)](https://shows.acast.com/decision-points/), and coauthor with Dennis Ross of the book [Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/be-strong-and-of-good-courage-how-israels-most-important-leaders-shaped-its\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/be-strong-and-of-good-courage-how-israels-most-important-leaders-shaped-its). This article was originally published *on the Forward website (https://forward.com/scribe/458287/saeb-erekat-the-friend-the-negotiator-and-the-politician/)*. ❖*

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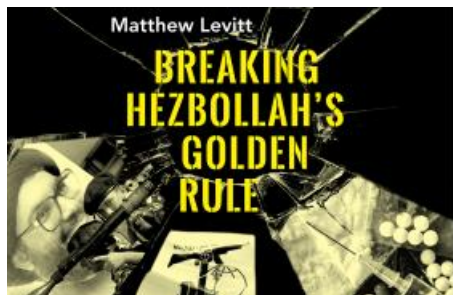
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