

# The U.S. Role in Palestinian Reconciliation: Three Scenarios

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Brief Analysis

**For now, Palestinian officials will likely pursue half-measures rather than a true unity government, so Washington may find limited value in a formal statement against Hamas.**

**F**ollowing the recent announcement of [Egyptian-brokered Fatah-Hamas reconciliation talks](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-egypt-can-help-hamas-and-fatah-implement-their-new-deal) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-egypt-can-help-hamas-and-fatah-implement-their-new-deal>), the Trump administration has entered the fray by reiterating its commitment to the so-called "Quartet principles" of 2006. As formulated by the UN, European Union, United States, and Russia, the principles stated that Hamas would not be accepted as a legitimate international actor until it accepted past agreements, eschewed violence, and accepted Israel's right to exist. In rare on-the-record remarks, Jason Greenblatt, the White House envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, called on any new Palestinian unity government to "unambiguously and explicitly" commit to these principles. "If Hamas is to play any role in a Palestinian government, it must accept these basic requirements," he stated on October 19, adding that all parties agree on the idea of the Palestinian Authority assuming "full, genuine, and unhindered" security and civil control over the Gaza Strip. It is essential that "we work together to improve the humanitarian situation for Palestinians living there," he noted.

The U.S. position -- which is similar to one adopted by the Israeli government -- would be most relevant if PA president Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas actually want to create a coalition government. Yet this seems unlikely, in part because Abbas is aware of American and Israeli redlines regarding Hamas and has therefore sought a government of technocrats. Even so, other scenarios still bear consideration, especially if Washington is thinking about releasing a formal statement on the Palestinian reconciliation bid.

**Scenario 1: Abbas wants to govern, Hamas wants the "Hezbollah model."** In this scenario, Abbas seeks to take

over Gaza in order to repair his legacy, which currently includes losing Gaza in 2007 and presiding over a divided polity for years. Standing on the sidelines would also raise the risk of giving his archrival Mohammad Dahlan a greater role in Gaza. Dahlan's powerful patron, the United Arab Emirates, may hope to increase its thus-far minimal role there, while one of Hamas's backers, Qatar, is preoccupied with a major diplomatic clash in the Gulf.

This scenario could also vindicate Abbas's belief that withholding 100 million of the 400 million shekels in PA budgetary support for Gaza earlier this year has made Hamas more amenable to PA demands. Therefore, even if the group shows no sign of dismantling its militia, perhaps future PA economic pressure will have a favorable impact.

In addition, this scenario would confirm a certain resignation among Hamas leaders -- namely, a realization that governing Gaza has been a political loser for them. They would prefer to follow the Hezbollah model of saddling the PA with the tough job of governing poverty-stricken Gaza while absolving themselves of responsibility and retaining true authority on the ground via their militia. Such an outcome is predicated on the view that the center of the group's political gravity has moved from Khaled Mashal in Qatar to a Gaza-based triumvirate of Yahya al-Sinwar, Ismail Haniyeh, and Marwan Issa, who by dint of their location may be more attuned to the people's suffering than Mashal, who is abroad and no longer heads the group. (The one non-Gazan leader in the so-called "Hamas Quartet" is Saleh al-Aroui, a Beirut-based official whom Israel sees as the group's primary link to Iran and West Bank terrorist cells.)

If Hamas does in fact realize it should get out of the governing business, then a U.S. statement on Palestinian reconciliation efforts would lose much of its punch. That is, if there is no danger of the PA forming a government with Hamas, then restating past rejections of the group's legitimacy may not affect Palestinian internal negotiations.

**Scenario 2: Neither side is serious.** Much like past reconciliation efforts, the current process is doomed if neither Abbas nor Hamas is serious about it. Under this scenario, Abbas views Gaza as quicksand -- a situation that will provide him with few benefits and plenty of headaches. According to this thinking, Abbas will never be able to control Gaza as long as Hamas maintains its militia, so he has little desire to try. Instead, he wants to put just enough effort into the Egyptian-brokered negotiations to avoid being criticized domestically when they fail, turning the blame onto Hamas as the talks unravel. This scenario also posits that Hamas does not want to yield any genuine power in Gaza -- the group is just using the idea of unity to bolster its fundraising efforts at a time of dire economic straits in Gaza. A U.S. statement would therefore not be impactful, since neither party will permit reconciliation to go forward anyway.

**Scenario 3. Neither breakthrough nor breakdown.** Former PA minister Ghassan Khatib has suggested maintaining a gray zone of sorts between Fatah and Hamas. By his account, "Hamas will not give Fatah a role in running Gaza without first being allowed to join the political leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization, [and] Fatah will not allow Hamas into the PLO unless it accepts the PLO's political program along with its political and security commitments."

Yet this third scenario acknowledges that there are external forces at work, and that the decision to move forward on Gaza is not up to Abbas and Hamas alone. Thus, even if the parties themselves do not want a breakthrough, external actors may view another breakdown as too politically costly for their own interests. Among those actors is Egypt, the driving force behind the current talks, whose role makes this round different from previous ones. Cairo's self-interest is evident -- it wants to create political distance between Hamas in Gaza and Islamic State terrorists in the adjacent Sinai desert, where the Egyptian military has sustained many casualties.

Israel has its own stake in the talks, of course. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's coalition recently announced that an Abbas-Hamas government is unacceptable, something the premier has stated many times in the past. At the same time, however, the Israeli defense establishment wants to avoid yet another Gaza war (three of which have

been fought since December 2008 alone). In making this argument, some defense officials have pointed out the link between Gaza's humanitarian suffering and its political/security situation.

For example, the latest issue of the Israel Defense Forces magazine *Bamahane* includes an article by Maj. Gen. Yoav Mordechai, the coordinator of government activities in the territories, along with his advisor on Palestinian affairs, Col. Michael Milstein. They write that the last war in Gaza "sharpened Israel's and Hamas's understanding of the Gordian knot between the civilian economic situation in Gaza and the security reality." They make clear that everyone has to be mindful of the Strip's economic needs while avoiding measures that strengthen Hamas militarily. According to the UN, massive unemployment and a lack of clean water, fuel, and public services have produced terrible living conditions in Gaza.

Israeli experts do not rule out some measures that may flow from Palestinian reconciliation, such as understandings on PA civil policing in Gaza, a halt to PA budgetary cuts, and PA control of border crossings. Taken together, such measures sound incremental, but they might be an improvement over current conditions. In any case, a U.S. statement would once again be tangential to this scenario, since there would be no change in the existing PA government.

### **CONCLUSION: WASHINGTON WAITS**

The United States will likely wait to see which of the above scenarios materializes. Reiterating the Quartet principles would be relevant if the parties do in fact head toward a full-blown reconciliation, serving as an effective way to warn them of which initiatives Washington can and cannot support. Yet in each of the more limited (and, perhaps, realistic) scenarios outlined above, a U.S. statement would not be decisive, or even relevant.

Accordingly, U.S. metrics for judging the success of the talks may vary. The parties have put down a rather ambitious timetable for implementing Egypt's reconciliation agreement over the next few months. Will they meet this timetable? And will Hamas change its military posture during this period? Washington will no doubt consult with Egypt and Israel on the latter issue. Israeli officials admit that Hamas has not fired a shot against their country since the 2014 war, but the group has dug more tunnels, retained its bomb factories, and stayed adamant in rejecting Israel's right to exist.

More broadly, these considerations suggest that the United States will not be putting forward any peace plans or engaging in high-stakes Middle East diplomacy until the Gaza situation is clarified. No publicly discernable progress has emerged from U.S. envoy visits to Jerusalem and Ramallah this year. Prior to the Cairo talks, President Trump appeared to warn Abbas at the UN in September that his administration does not have an open-ended view of diplomacy. Furthermore, Trump did not mention the Israeli-Palestinian issue during his General Assembly speech. Whatever significance those gestures might hold for long-term peacemaking, U.S. officials have indicated that the Cairo talks will keep any U.S. effort on a very low flame for the time being.

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