

# Reports from across the Green Line: Politics and Policy in Israel and the West Bank

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

**O**n January 29, Ghaith al-Omari, Dennis Ross, and David Makovsky addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Ambassador Ross, the Institute's counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow, recently returned from a regional trip that included meetings with high-level Israeli and Palestinian officials. Omari is a senior fellow at the Institute and former Palestinian negotiator. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks; Makovsky's observations were published separately as [PolicyWatch 2365](#) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-pa-goes-passive>).

## GHAITH AL-OMARI

**T**he Palestinian Authority's most recent international efforts reflect a genuine loss of faith in negotiations with Israel. Turmoil in the PA, coupled with the policies of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, have convinced Palestinians that the peace process will not yield the desired results. Thus, following last year's Gaza war and the subsequent rise in Hamas's popularity, the PA felt compelled to take action via various international bodies -- including the International Criminal Court and the UN Security Council -- in order to avoid domestic political irrelevance. Yet the steps it has taken do not constitute a strategy; instead, they minimize the PA's options.

The PA hopes that the international community and Israel will not respond with punitive measures given their vested interest in the PA's success. But Israel has already withheld tax funds vital to the Palestinian budget, and Arab states recently objected that the PA has refrained from consulting them in its decisionmaking. Moreover, Arab leaders will likely remain cautious about dealing with the Palestinian issue on the international stage in order to avoid complicating their delicate security cooperation with the multilateral fight against the "Islamic State"/ISIS. In the end, the PA will also struggle to sell its efforts to the Palestinian public because it will have expended its most

valuable international options and still not have achieved statehood.

In the likely case that the PA's approach does not bring concrete success, the international community will have several options. While some may argue for renewing final-status negotiations, the political gaps between the parties make this largely unfeasible. Another route -- known as the "jijitsu option," in which outside actors essentially take over the process and craft an international resolution acceptable to all parties -- is also unlikely to yield tangible results. Although the international community appears to agree on the general terms of such a resolution, the details on issues such as refugees and Jerusalem may divide rather than unite various governments. Additionally, this scenario would likely spur the Palestinians and Israelis to harden their positions, requiring a preoccupied international community to devote major resources to this option.

Nevertheless, the international community can effect important change by prioritizing Palestinian domestic politics, encouraging good governance and freedom of expression, and ensuring that security cooperation remains nonpoliticized. By focusing on deliverables for the Palestinians -- short of a final-status agreement -- and emphasizing coordinated unilateralism, outside parties can move the PA away from its internationalized approach to more modest, but concrete, on-the-ground successes.

## **DENNIS ROSS**

Israel views the Iranian nuclear issue in tandem with Tehran's activism in the region. It also believes that overlooking said activism could lead Tehran to miscalculate. Israel and many Arab countries have expressed great concern that the U.S. administration is giving Iran a pass and seems ready to treat the Islamic Republic as a future regional partner. In the meantime, Tehran is actively trying to change the regional balance of power while transferring increasingly accurate missiles to Hezbollah.

The United States and Israel hold conceptually different perspectives on the nuclear issue. While Israel has officially said it will not accept any agreement that allows Iran to enrich uranium, this stance is more tactical than strategic -- Israelis would likely tolerate a limited degree of enrichment if an agreement emerges that they deem acceptable. What they fear is not so much a small enrichment program, but rather an agreement that eventually permits Iran to have an industrial-size nuclear program. In such a circumstance, they believe Iran would be left as a threshold nuclear state at some point in the future -- one capable of breaking out to a nuclear weapons capability at a time of its choosing.

The U.S. position seems to hold that Iran would technically be permitted to have an industrial-size program down the road; in the meantime, the international community would be assured that Tehran will remain at least a year away from being able to break out. With appropriate transparency, Washington believes that such an arrangement would allow it to detect Iranian cheating and give it sufficient time to do something about it. The key difference, then, is not over what happens in the next year or two, but over what Iran would be permitted to do when the term of a potential agreement is up -- say ten to fifteen years from now. The United States seems to believe it has no better alternative, and that deferring the Iranians for that long could produce favorable changes in the interim.

Interestingly, this basic conceptual difference with Israel may be moot because Tehran is unwilling to concede much at the moment, greatly diluting the prospects of a comprehensive deal. On this, the two allies seem to agree -- though Israel fears that Washington and its P5+1 partners might continue making concessions to Iran.

Another difference could emerge if the United States does not achieve a comprehensive agreement, but instead settles for the Joint Plan of Action as the "new normal." Although this arrangement may be preferable in the near term, it could leave Iran three months away from achieving a nuclear weapons capability and putting Israel in an untenable situation.

Regarding the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the growing disbelief between the two sides is one of the most

alarming developments in recent years because it makes any deal unlikely, much less a comprehensive two-state agreement. The Palestinians openly admit that their international efforts do not represent an answer or tangible progress, but rather a default position that can pressure and perhaps delegitimize Israel. For their part, many Israelis regard talk of "peace" or "two states" as no longer credible; instead, politicians make the case for advancing the peace process to avoid international isolation.

Undoubtedly, this emerging trend must be reversed. With each side convinced that the other is not committed to a two-state outcome, formulating ways to reestablish belief is important. Israelis are convinced that Palestinians favor a binational state, while Palestinians are convinced that Israel will never give up occupation. Soon -- perhaps after the next Israeli government is formed -- it will be time for a new effort to produce mutual recognition. For example, instead of exchanging letters as the parties did in 1993, what about a public exchange in which Israel commits to ending occupation and the Palestinians commit to two states for two peoples? Israel could declare that its settlement building policy would henceforth be consistent with its two-state policy, meaning it would build only on land it believes will be part of Israel, not in areas it believes will be part of the Palestinian state. For their part, the Palestinians would declare that they accept the principle of blocs, and the idea of Israelis living in areas that will become a part of their state as future citizens living under Palestinian law.

The issue of international delegitimization is also significant. The next Israeli government must take initiative because the momentum behind delegitimization will increase if it does not. For example, settlements are seen internationally as the symbol of Israel never giving up occupation, so the biggest step it could take to undercut delegitimization efforts would be to do what was described above: declare that its settlement policy will be consistent with a two-state outcome and tailor its construction activity accordingly. Of course, the two sides are likely to disagree on where the border will be, and that issue would have to be negotiated, but as a general policy Israel would no longer build east of its West Bank security barrier.

Regarding Israel's upcoming elections, it is quite difficult to tell who will emerge victorious. At present, some 10 to 15 percent of voters are undecided, the persistence of the center bloc is uncertain, and unexpected events may yet emerge.

*This summary was prepared by Adam Rasgon. ❖*

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