

Obama, Israelis, and Palestinians: More Words, Less Action

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

Jan 11, 2013

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.



[David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.



Articles & Testimony

In the coming months, what the parties say will be more important than what they do.

This piece is part of "*Obama and the Middle East: Act Two* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-atlantic-obama-and-the-middle-east-act-two>), " a series of policy proposals for the president's second term by Washington Institute fellows.

In addressing the seemingly endless Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the second Obama administration, in sharp contrast to the first, enjoys the ironic advantage of exceedingly low expectations. That will make it easier to avoid inflating false hopes whose disappointment haunted all of President Obama's first four years in office.

Although they have carefully evaded a complete rupture in relations, Israelis and Palestinians have hardly held any peace talks, and have instead increasingly indulged in unilateral provocation and retaliation throughout this period.

So it is unrealistic to expect any early breakthroughs in this impasse. On the contrary; the entire issue will probably have lower priority as compared with Obama's first term, when he made a grand play of focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict "from day one" -- only to spend the next four futile years trying just to get back to square one.

Other, more urgent Mideast crises in Syria, Iran, Egypt and elsewhere, and the president's own perception of a pressing need for more "nation-building at home," make Palestinians and Israelis pale by comparison. And Israel's election on January 22, plus the time it takes to put a new governing coalition together, will postpone any serious new steps on this problem.

Nevertheless, it would be wise both to limit the damage of inaction, and to keep some hope alive of future progress toward peace. That means discreetly exploring possible steps toward territorial deals, and supporting peaceful, cooperative "bottom-up" Palestinian Authority (PA) state-building projects. Most urgently, it means preventing the PA's financial bankruptcy or political collapse, encouraging Israel's newly elected government to come up with constructive diplomatic suggestions, and quietly working with both sides to keep the West Bank as eerily calm as it has been despite the stalemate in the peace process and the violent turmoil all around the region.

Right now, both immediate damage limitation and future peace preservation require a relentless U.S. focus on preventing violence. Either a new intifadah or a cutoff of PA security cooperation with Israel must trigger a cutoff of U.S. aid to the PA. And the only trigger for Western "engagement" with Hamas, or PA "unity" with it, should be the eminently reasonable Quartet conditions that have held up remarkably well for the better part of the past decade: recognize Israel, renounce violence, and respect previous international agreements. To do otherwise would be to undercut the one Palestinian partner for peace that has ever emerged, and that remains the best slender, long-term hope of ever resolving this tragic conflict.

But there is also one new, positive approach that would make good sense as a first step for the incoming Obama administration. That is to take very seriously what Palestinians and Israelis say to each other, and what the U.S. says about them -- and try to do something creative about it.

As soon as the Israeli election is over, the U.S. should ask both sides to reiterate their public commitment to the principle of a permanent, peaceful two-state solution to their conflict. Prime Minister Netanyahu has said so on Israeli television, even in the heat of his current electoral campaign, and it would be very useful for him to say it again right after the votes are counted.

President Abbas has also appeared recently on Israeli television, stating that he renounced any personal "right of return" to his home town of Safed -- and that Palestine today means the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, but not pre-1967 Israel, "now and forever." The U.S. should ask him to repeat those assurances, along with his public disagreement with Hamas about its rejection of the principle of peace with Israel. The planned visit of the Emir of Qatar to Ramallah in February, following up on his recent trip to Gaza, would be an excellent occasion for Abbas to drive home this point.

Furthermore, the U.S. should quickly seize upon the positive elements in the late-November UNGA resolution on Palestinian statehood to reinforce this peaceful message. Buried in the text of that resolution is some surprisingly good language: commitment to peaceful conduct and coexistence with other nations; acceptance of the need to negotiate with Israel the precise borders of the new Palestinian state; and recognition of Jerusalem, for the first time in such a document, as the capital of Israel as well as of Palestine. Though it voted against the resolution, Washington should publicly emphasize and urge reaffirmation of these points.

Going beyond reaffirmation, the U.S. should promptly urge Israelis and Palestinians to devise good new statements, which could eventually pave the way for mutually acceptable action. For example, while the PA clearly has a hard time saying the words "Jewish state," how about a "democratic state for the Jewish people"? How about acknowledging the historic Jewish link to Jerusalem, alluded to even in the Quran? Or suggesting that those settlers not accommodated within newly negotiated Israeli borders could remain as peaceful residents of Palestine?

On the Israeli side, the U.S. can ask the prime minister to recognize publicly that Muslims, too, have a historic link to Jerusalem. He could suggest that Palestinian refugees, including those desperately at risk in Syria right now, would be welcome in a future Palestinian state. He could also say out loud what many close observers already know: that Israel will add housing for settlers almost only in the small areas likely to be swapped for other territory ceded to the Palestinians. Such a statement would ring truer if Israel actually stops building at all beyond the security barrier.

The other, equally important side of this rhetorical coin is for the U.S. to systematically protest against incitement, by either side. It is absurd for the U.S. to proclaim its absolute opposition to terrorism, while accepting PA officials and institutions that openly hold up suicide bombers as heroes and role models. Similarly, albeit more narrowly, the U.S. should urge Israel to dismantle the monument in Hebron to the Israeli murderer Baruch Goldstein -- and urge Israeli politicians, once their election campaign is over, to stop calling Abbas a "political terrorist."

Perhaps these suggestions seem simple, but words really do matter. Objecting to Israeli new settlement construction on the West Bank, in order to preserve the possibility of a "two-state solution," is at best only half a strategy. The other half must be to convince Israelis that such a solution really would offer a better chance -- for there could never be any foolproof guarantee -- of security and lasting peace. That is why, to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace, the U.S. needs to pay at least as much attention to hate speech as to housing starts.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. David Pollock is the Institute's Kaufman fellow. ❖

The Atlantic

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Facing Syria's Food Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ishtar Al Shami

[\(/policy-analysis/facing-syrias-food-crisis\)](/policy-analysis/facing-syrias-food-crisis)

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](/policy-analysis/palestinians)