

# Merging Bottom-Up and Top-Down Peace Efforts: A Jerusalem-Ramallah Trip Report

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Brief Analysis

On November 23, 2010, David Makovsky, along with Robert Satloff and J. Scott Carpenter, addressed a special Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Institute and director of its [Project on the Middle East Peace Process \(templateI02.php?SID=16\)](#). At the forum, he offered fresh observations, summarized below, from the Israeli-Palestinian portion of the Institute's recent Middle East study tour. Dr. Satloff's and Mr. Carpenter's remarks were published as [PolicyWatch #1728 \(templateC05.php?CID=3278\)](#).

The Washington Institute study tour arrived in the region amid ongoing U.S.-led diplomacy aimed at finding a formula that would enable the resumption of Middle East peace talks. Following meetings with Israeli and Palestinian Authority (PA) officials, the Institute delegation came away with a sense of optimism regarding on-the-ground developments in the West Bank, and with a finer understanding of the issues that are holding up negotiations.

### Steady Improvements in the West Bank

Recent years have seen much bottom-up progress in the West Bank: improved social services, rapid economic growth, and excellent Israeli-PA security cooperation. The Institute delegation met with Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, Prime Minister Salam Fayad, the two PA security chiefs, and other relevant actors, all of whom cited tangible measures of such progress.

Regarding social services, for example, 120 new schools have been built in the West Bank in recent years. As a result, few if any children have to attend schools operating on double shifts. The PA has also built three new hospitals and fifty new health facilities. In terms of infrastructure, 1,700 kilometers of roads have been paved or repaved, and 1,400 kilometers of water pipes have been laid. Other institutions have also shown improvement: the courts have sharply increased their workload -- meaning criminals are actually being prosecuted -- and tax collection has grown by 50 percent over the past year alone.

Regarding economic progress, the International Monetary Fund has stated that the PA's gross national product is increasing at a rate of 8-9 percent annually despite the worldwide recession. Although international aid accounts for

some of this growth, Fayad pointed out that foreign assistance earmarked for PA budgetary support actually declined from \$1.8 billion in 2008 to \$1.2 billion in 2009, with 2010 projections running as low as \$1 billion. He added that poverty has decreased by a third over the past three years, and unemployment is trending downward in the West Bank. Israel deserves at least some credit for these improvements, given that it has reduced major manned checkpoints in the West Bank from forty-two to eleven and removed most roadblocks as well, greatly facilitating transportation in the territory.

Regarding security cooperation, senior Israeli military sources indicate that only nineteen shooting incidents occurred in the West Bank in 2009, down from 700 in 2007. In fact, the Hamas killing of four Israeli settlers on the eve of September 2010 peace talks constituted the first major Israeli fatalities in the territory in three years.

According to top Israeli and PA security officials, cooperation between the two parties is constant, not episodic. The revolving-door problem witnessed during the Arafat era -- in which Palestinian terrorists were illegally released from jail on a regular basis -- is over. In addition, PA security officials reported, and Israeli security officials confirmed, that some 300 Hamas-run charities funneling money for illicit purposes have been closed and reopened under responsible, non-Hamas management. Hamas has also all control over West Bank mosques under PA geographic jurisdiction; the PA has replaced imams who promote suicide bombing and is paying close attention to the content of sermons. Moreover, 3,600 Palestinian security personnel have been professionally trained thanks to a program established near Amman by Jordan and the U.S. security coordinator for Israel and the PA. Not one case of corruption or attacks against Israelis has emanated from these forces.

The confidence engendered by this security cooperation has paid dividends for both sides. According to Palestinian polls, 73 percent of West Bank residents now believe that PA security forces work for the people, a huge improvement over past years. The cooperation has also allowed Israel to reduce its military presence in the territory, from a peak of forty-three battalions during the 2000-2004 intifada to less than half that number today.

Many in the West Bank and Israel believe that the security improvements are sustainable. They are optimistic that self-interest will guarantee continued cooperation, especially if it is reinforced by progress at the peace table. In contrast, other observers view the cooperation as a tactical move that will wind to an end after its instrumental value has expired. For the moment, however, the PA and Israel share an interest in preventing Hamas from gaining a foothold in the West Bank -- an interest internalized by both sides after the 2007 Gaza takeover.

#### Obstacles Persist

Although many metrics in the West Bank are trending in a positive direction, incitement against Israel remains an issue. Top PA officials told the Institute delegation that advocating violence against any entities, including Israel, was illegal. At the same time, their preferred approach to the issue is to establish a trilateral committee with the United States and Israel so that the PA can raise its own grievances about Israeli incitement.

Regarding Gaza and Hamas, Palestinian officials were not optimistic about the prospect of rapid progress on that front. They tended to believe that Iran would not permit Hamas to rejoin the PA. For its part, the PA is not prepared to compromise on its core security doctrine, which holds that only PA forces are permitted to be armed, effectively outlawing any Hamas militia in the West Bank.

#### Resumption of Peace Talks

Both Israeli and Palestinian officials are intently focused on U.S. diplomacy aimed at revitalizing the top-down peace talks. The Obama administration has begun to shift its focus from the settlements issue to border and security arrangements. After all, determining the final borders of a Palestinian state would render the settlement issue moot. Toward this end, Washington has proposed another (avowedly final) ninety-day settlement construction moratorium to focus on the border issue, in exchange for security and diplomatic incentives to Israel.

According to various sources, during a lengthy early November meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in New York, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu verbally committed to the core U.S. demand: seeking meaningful progress on territorial negotiations. One could speculate that Washington views such progress as indispensable to a potential U.S. bridging proposal after the moratorium. In any event, the United States has committed to holding parallel U.S.-Israeli security talks, which will be focused on Israeli security requirements critical to the prospects of any peace agreement. According to Yediot Ahronot newspaper, high-level American and Israeli officials have already quietly begun such talks over the past few months.

Regarding Washington's incentive package to Israel, although the text of the relevant agreement has already been established, the parties have yet to resolve three key issues not mentioned in the document. First, the United States wants a reaffirmation from Netanyahu that he will attempt to make progress on territorial talks. Second, Shas -- the party in Netanyahu's coalition that holds the balance of power in the security cabinet -- wants the United States to accept, or at least not object to, a plan that would significantly increase Jewish housing in east Jerusalem. Washington seems unlikely to accede on that issue, however. Third, Netanyahu would like a backup plan in the event that Congress refuses to go along with one provision in the incentive package: namely, that the United States provide most of the funding for twenty more F-35 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft in addition to the initial twenty already promised to Israel.

Once these issues are resolved, Netanyahu will take the package to his fifteen-member security cabinet for approval. Following Israeli approval, President Obama will sign the text.

#### Conclusion

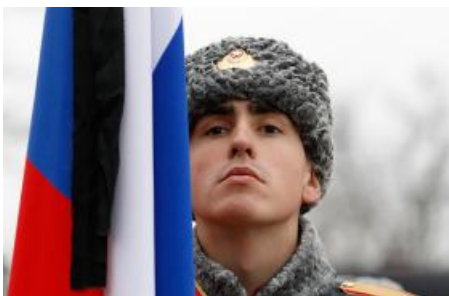
On-the-ground developments in the West Bank left the Institute delegation feeling optimistic about ongoing institution-building efforts and the future of security cooperation. The Palestinians and Israelis who have ushered in these developments clearly view them as state-building efforts and believe that they are making progress on multiple fronts. Accordingly, the bottom-up efforts would most not likely proceed independently if obstacles impeded the top-down peace negotiations. ❖

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