

Diagnosing the Impasse in the Middle East Peace Process

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Brief Analysis

On November 6, 2009, Ghaith al-Omari, Ehud Yaari, and Robert Satloff addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. Ghaith al-Omari, advocacy director at the American Task Force on Palestine, is former director of the international relations department in the office of the Palestinian president. **[Ehud Yaari \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=103\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=103)** is a Middle East commentator for Israel's Channel Two and a Lafer international fellow at The Washington Institute. **[Robert Satloff \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC10.php?CID=11\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC10.php?CID=11)** is the executive director of The Washington Institute; his comments are published as **[PolicyWatch #1601 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3140\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3140)**. The following is a rapporteur's summary.

Ghaith al-Omari

Any negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis must be based on the framework of a permanent solution. Talks cannot start with a focus on an intermediate stage in the Quartet's 2003 Roadmap peace initiative -- e.g., a "stage 2½" involving steps such as a partial Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and interim agreements on Jerusalem and refugees. Rather, the participants must identify an end result toward which all negotiations are oriented. The path to a permanent solution must include predetermined benchmarks to highlight interim progress on institution building and the peace process at large, as well as to infuse the negotiations with positive energy.

It is crucial that along this path, state- and institution-building measures are not delinked from the present political track under the guidance of U.S. Middle East envoy George Mitchell. In addition, a Palestinian state cannot be established if it lacks substance, and a state must not be defined solely by name. Such a hollow entity would provide an opening for Hamas to target the Palestinian Authority's (PA's) capabilities and to gain power in the Palestinian political arena as a result.

Today in Palestinian politics, no consensus exists as to who will lead Fatah and the PA, including in prospective

permanent-status negotiations, should President Mahmoud Abbas actually follow through on his threat not to seek reelection in the January 24, 2010, vote. Unlike the smooth transition that occurred after Arafat's death, no clear line of succession exists today. Rather, the PA finds itself in a moment of reorganization: alliances are forming, centers of political power are congealing, and the internal leadership map is being redrawn.

Should a succession struggle take place, it will inevitably, and undoubtedly, cause Abbas's Fatah party to implode. In fact, the Palestinian political system as it currently stands would be unable to survive a multicandidate election in the wake of Abbas's resignation. In the event of a succession fight, Fatah's only chance for survival would be through the agreed-upon selection by senior Fatah leaders of one or two candidates to run in the scheduled January elections. Yet, with the system as fragile as it is, we can safely assume that Abbas will indeed be PA president on January 25, 2010.

This does not mean, however, that Abbas lacks a reason to be frustrated with his current position, even if some of his own miscalculations are to blame. He had expected the United States to bring the Israelis and Palestinians to the table only after a complete settlement freeze had been enacted. Yet he had misread the map in front of him, placing too much emphasis on a settlement freeze as a necessary precondition -- rather than a negotiable aspiration -- for talks.

Hamas's leadership structure is trifold: political, military, and diaspora. The resulting variety of perspectives on the organization, and its future orientation, can cause notable tension come decisionmaking time. Most contentious is the debate over Hamas's use of force and its character as a resistance organization. Across the spectrum, Hamas leaders want the right to use force, but this does not mean that they will actually use it. Hamas garners domestic political support by threatening armed resistance while winning acceptance abroad by shunning violence and putting on the face of a political party. This is why the international community must compel Hamas to make a decision: to use violence or not, but to make a choice. The unacceptable status quo allows Hamas to win on both fronts.

Ehud Yaari

Though efforts have been renewed to bring about a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, to usher in an era of peace, Palestinian statehood should be the primary focus of current and future negotiations. On the Palestinian street, support for a two-state solution is waning. Rather than sovereignty, many have expressed increasing interest in a stateless independence marked by the cessation of the Israeli occupation. To ensure that the Palestinian commitment to a two-state solution does not disintegrate to the point of nonexistence, the Obama administration ought to give financial resources -- and land -- to PA prime minister Salam Fayad, the Palestinian leader who has worked toward building Palestinian institutions.

To begin with, Israeli and Palestinian leaders should agree to a cessation-of-hostilities agreement that will serve as stage 2½ or "2+" in the three-phase Roadmap peace initiative. This stage would entail a comprehensive package deal, short of a final-status peace treaty, leading to Palestinian statehood within armistice boundaries. Stage 2½ would also include Israeli withdrawal from 40 to 80 percent of the West Bank and an "end to occupation" in those areas, as well as interim agreements for East Jerusalem and refugees in PA territory.

While Mahmoud Abbas rightfully feels let down by his Israeli and U.S. counterparts, he himself has yet to show a willingness to compromise on two core issues of the peace process: Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees. Abbas should state publicly that the Palestine Liberation Organization/PA accepts the religious, emotional, and historic attachment of the Jewish people to Jerusalem. Making such a statement would be an enormous step forward on the path to peace and the creation of a Palestinian state.

Hamas has suspended its active resistance against Israel, but the group will not give up the use of force entirely.

Since Operation Cast Lead -- Israel's three-week incursion into Gaza early this year -- Hamas has been far more careful about using force. After all, not even militant groups use violence every day of the week. Yet the broader debate centers on whether Hamas's military wing should run the organization and, by default, the entire Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood. Can Hamas afford a takeover by its military wing? In addition to the internal importance of this debate are its implications for the Palestinian political arena. Hamas would win if free elections were held in the West Bank today. Therefore, the group's political-military balance will have enormous consequences not only for Palestinian politics but perhaps for the peace process and the establishment of a Palestinian state as well.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Benjamin Freedman. ❖

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