

The Peace Process, Circa 2009

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky/\)](/experts/david-makovsky/), [Ehud Yaari \(/experts/ehud-yaari/\)](/experts/ehud-yaari/)

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On October 17, 2009, David Makovsky, Khalil Shikaki, and Ehud Yaari addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the [Project on the Middle East Peace Process \(templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Project%20on%20the%20Middle%20East%20Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Project%20on%20the%20Middle%20East%20Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) at The Washington Institute. Khalil Shikaki is director of the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research and a senior fellow at Brandeis University's Crown Center for Middle East Studies. Ehud Yaari, Israel's leading interpreter of Arab politics, is a Washington Institute Lafer international fellow and Middle East correspondent for Israel's Channel Two.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

David Makovsky

Current analyses of the peace process tend to take either a bottom-up or a top-down approach. The bottom-up approach is grounded in the good news emanating from the West Bank, where significant economic and security progress are transforming the territory into the model for future Palestinian statehood that many thought it could never be.

From Israel's perspective, the number of Israeli deaths at the hands of Palestinians in the territory has dropped to nearly zero, while cooperation and trust between their respective security forces have improved dramatically. From the Palestinian perspective, the public's sense of personal security has increased sharply, while concerns about government corruption are down. Moreover, the West Bank has seen strong economic growth over the past year -- 7 percent according to recent International Monetary Fund estimates. These changes have much to do with the approach being taken by Prime Minister Salam Fayad, whose goal is to depart from the past style of Yasser Arafat and vigorously engage in state building even before a final-status agreement is reached. The Obama administration must get behind such efforts. Specifically, it should make economic development and institution building a central focus of its policy, both by providing direct U.S. support and by pressuring Arab states to offer more vigorous assistance.

At the same time, all parties must continue to make progress along the "top-down" path -- that is, negotiations toward peace. Such progress could create key political space for Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and Fayad, enabling them to fend off internal critics who assert that institution building will not enhance the prospects of true statehood if there is no political track. Although Obama's early focus on fostering such negotiations was correct, the administration needs to step back from its push toward comprehensive negotiations. Instead, it should focus on the issue that Israelis and Palestinians are already closest to agreeing on: borders.

If a border agreement could be reached, all parties would benefit. Palestinian moderates would be bolstered, and the firm outlines of a Palestinian state would materialize, reinforcing the improvements occurring on the ground. For their part, Israel and the United States would finally be able to move past the settlements issue, which would strengthen their relations. A land-swap agreement would also resolve the settlers' uncertain legal status, since most of them would be included within the final borders of Israel. If progress can be made on the borders issue, it would keep open the long-term possibility of an actual, final resolution -- one that draws in neighboring Arab states step by step and, ultimately, creates a Jewish state of Israel and a Palestinian state living next to one another in peace.

Khalil Shikaki

A number of emerging signs in the West Bank suggest that peace may be more attainable today than it ever has been in the past. The first of these encouraging signs is the recent transformation in how the Palestinian Authority manages both itself and the West Bank. In August 2009, for example, Fatah significantly altered its internal composition during its sixth party congress. In the past, the majority of Fatah delegates represented Palestinian refugees who lived outside the territories, thus crippling the party's ability and desire to deal with internal issues in the West Bank. The old guard has slowly been replaced, however, and in the wake of the recent congress, only a quarter of the delegates represent the diaspora population.

This change means that Palestinian leaders can focus primarily on issues like state building and ending the occupation. They have already made major progress on the former issue. The institutions of government in Palestine have gained an unprecedented level of credibility and sophistication, to the point where even Abbas has been forced to stand accountable to them -- something Yasser Arafat never had to do. Additionally, the West Bank security forces have dramatically improved their training, structure, and ability to keep the Palestinian people safe.

The Palestinian Authority's current strength puts it in a position to deal with the issue of Hamas and make progress toward peace with Israel. Although an actual reconciliation agreement with Hamas is highly unlikely, the Egyptian mediation is still valuable in that it can spur a forced reconciliation through elections in June 2010. Fatah's recent successes would give it a strong advantage over Hamas in those elections. Yet the party still needs to improve on certain fronts in order to fully bolster its electoral prospects. For example, it should release prisoners currently being held without charge or access to lawyers and courts. It will also need to make some headway on the peace process.

Given this optimistic outlook, the best approach for the United States would be to push for a quick border agreement defining the final boundaries of the West Bank. This would resolve the settlements issue and restore the credibility of President Obama and Palestinian moderates in the eyes of the Palestinian people. At the same time, the United States should support the continued growth of institutions and economic development in the West Bank. Such a policy would allow conditions to progress to a point where even the most complex issues -- refugees and the holy places of Jerusalem -- could eventually be solved by two states working side by side, with the participation of the United States and the major Arab players in the region.

Ehud Yaari

Currently, a number of major obstacles stand in the way of successfully concluding final-status negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian people. These obstacles make the Obama administration's goal of resuming talks on the main issues -- borders, Jerusalem, and refugees -- unrealistic. In fact, if the administration continues to pursue a comprehensive, final peace

agreement, it will likely cause stagnation in the actual process and lead to a deadlock in negotiations.

A principal component of this problem is the rift within the Palestinian polity. Because the government is split between the Fatah Party in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza, Palestinian negotiations with Israel can have no real legitimacy. Nor do Egypt's latest efforts to reconcile the two factions and reunite the Palestinian territories seem likely to bear fruit. Reconciliation is not in the best interests of either side, since neither is willing to risk losing sovereignty in the area it controls. At most, Cairo's efforts will produce an agreement on paper that will never actually be implemented on the ground. In other words, the current division of the Palestinian territories seems likely to last for a long time.

Even if it were possible to negotiate a legitimate agreement between Israel and Fatah alone, Abbas has shown no signs that he is willing or able to make the compromises necessary on the refugee issue. Moreover, Palestinian leaders continue to deny the Jewish people's deep-seated connection to Jerusalem -- an attitude that puts negotiations over the holy places on shaky ground from the start. Such issues represent a larger problem: the leaders of the Palestinian people have shown no real desire or drive to push for a workable peace agreement. This yearning for a complete peace and true self-governance is something that no outside power, whether American or Arab, can impose on the Palestinian leadership -- they must develop it themselves.

Given the current situation, pursuing a comprehensive settlement is not Washington's best path toward a two-state solution. Instead, it should set its sights lower and attempt to forge a deal that brings conditions on the ground closer to peace, and the Palestinians closer to true self-governance. The borders of the West Bank should be finalized, leaving out all the other more contentious and currently unsolvable issues. This would set the stage for an armistice agreement similar to those brokered in 1949 between Israel and the Arab states, giving Palestinians the beginnings of a state and the opportunity to more fully develop that entity over time. ❖

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