

# Asad, Fayad, and U.S. Diplomacy: New Directions in Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking?

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

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## 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.

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## Brief Analysis

On July 31, 2007, David Makovsky, Hatem Abdul Khader, and Ephraim Sneh addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Makovsky is a senior fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. Mr. Abdul Khader is a former Palestinian Legislative Council member from Jerusalem, representing Fatah. Mr. Sneh is a member of Knesset in the Labor Party and an outgoing deputy defense minister. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## DAVID MAKOVSKY

The past seven years of Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been long and full of despair. The stakes are high right now, and if the moderates do not unite, the future will see a national conflict turn into a religious one. The situation is complicated by outside actors fueling the conflict; Muhammad Dahlan recently stated that Iran and Qatar have each given Hamas \$400 million over the years.

The United States and its allies must take advantage of every opening to ensure that radical forces do not organize. The situation for Prime Ministers Ehud Olmert and Salam Fayad is not as pessimistic as one might think. Olmert's government is unlikely to fall -- the publication of the Winograd Commission's second report has been delayed, the aftermath of the summer 2006 Lebanon war is not dominating the political landscape, and the Israeli public is not clamoring for new elections. Olmert has also been boosted by the appointment of Haim Ramon as vice prime minister and Ehud Barak as minister of defense and deputy prime minister.

As for the Palestinians, Fatah and Fayad have a symbiotic relationship. Fayad needs Fatah's support base, while Fatah needs to clean up its image with a leader untainted by corruption. Both also share the goal of preventing the Islamization of the West Bank. The question is whether Fayad can maintain his clean image in practice. So far, his leadership has resulted in a fugitives deal with Israel, the payment of salaries for the first time in a year and a half, the release of 250 Palestinian prisoners, and a meeting at which he instructed 800 imams not to disseminate political messages.

A number of challenges lie ahead, however. In regard to the security forces, Fayad's support base is uncertain, given that Abbas does not meet with his security commanders as regular as Arafat once did. There is also a need to build

secular Palestinian services and institutions to counter those of Hamas. Recent economic changes on the ground and the active diplomatic process launched by the United States may facilitate real changes. As for diplomacy with Israel, Haim Ramon will be a key figure. Olmert has stated publicly that he wants to work on the principles of Palestinian statehood, but the challenge will be whether to deal with all of the outstanding issues at once.

It is unclear whether the international meeting called for by the United States would create momentum for progress. It is important not to raise expectations too high -- if the meeting fails, Hamas will claim victory, saying that diplomacy has been proven ineffective.

HATEM ABDUL KHADER

The American and Israeli administrations are partially responsible for what happened in Gaza. This explains the quick collapse of the security forces. Also, for Fatah, spilling Palestinian blood is a red line; for Hamas, it is permitted. This is why Fatah did not retaliate during the Hamas takeover.

Although there is no geographical continuity between Gaza and the West Bank, many Palestinians still consider the two areas one entity. Gaza, in our minds, is a province in revolt that must be brought back to legality without punishing Gazans.

To be sure, Fatah has its share of problems, but it can still negotiate and make peace. When Abu Mazen acts, it is on behalf of all Palestinians. Fatah believes Marwan Barghouti, a charismatic and popular prisoner in Israel, is key to the process. If released, Barghouti would bolster Fatah and help effect real reform. We hope, as many Israelis do, that the Israeli government will be pressured to release him as part of a deal.

In any case, the suffering and bloodshed of Palestinians and Israelis must end. Solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not impossible. We hope that this horizon opens soon, and that Fayad's government follows international stipulations and respects the commitments of the Palestine Liberation Organization. We also have high hopes for the U.S. role, especially in realizing a two-state solution. We think the international conference President Bush has called for may mark a new era.

EPRHAIM SNEH

The Hamas takeover of Gaza requires us to rethink our behavior and practice. One lesson is that passivity, skepticism, and cynicism lead nowhere other than catastrophe. We must define the shared objectives of the United States, Israel, the Palestinians, and the international community. The most pressing issue is preventing the West Bank from becoming like Gaza. Other urgent issues include promoting a two-state solution and containing Iran's regional ambitions.

In practical terms, we must make the West Bank a success story. This means rapid economic development and close security cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians. Recently, a Palestinian businessman told me that the West Bank should be like West Berlin and Gaza East Berlin so that Palestinians can compare and choose. The most important step is to begin final-status negotiations between Israel and the legal Palestinian government led by Fayad and Abbas. Nothing is more essential to defeating Hamas than presenting a political horizon with a concrete timetable. If we want Palestinians to choose dialogue over terror, then we must make it clear that negotiations bring about the fulfillment of national aspirations.

Some Arab forces are trying to convince the Palestinian leadership to reach a second Mecca accord. Israel does not agree with this thinking, however. The result of the February Mecca conference was not a national unity government, but a ceasefire agreement. It seems the Palestinian leadership is not enthusiastic about another Mecca either.

What should be done about Gaza? The most important matter is preventing a humanitarian disaster. Such an event would shift the international community's sympathy to Hamas. That is why Israel has supplied Gaza with water,

electricity, medical equipment, and fuel and is allowing relief organizations to work. We also must prove that Hamas can neither govern nor provide law and order, and least of all be able to fulfill Palestinian national aspirations. There can be no dialogue with Hamas.

President Bush's proposed international meeting must not be just a photo opportunity -- such a development would only produce frustration. Donor states should come with concrete ideas about how to support the West Bank economy in the coming year. If this meeting results in all parties -- the United States, the European Union, the international community, and moderate Arab states -- supporting the final-status principles, proceeding further would be much easier.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Margaret Weiss. ❖

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