

Time to Turn Fatah into Model of Success in Mideast

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Jun 21, 2007

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Historically, Palestinians have always felt that they could ill afford to fight themselves. Yet, today we are witnessing just such a struggle between Fatah and Hamas, and the very identity of the Palestinian people and their cause is at stake. Will the cause be a national cause or a religious one? Will a two-state solution -- meaning Israel and Palestine -- remain a possibility, or will conflict be an enduring reality between Israelis and Palestinians?

Fatah and Hamas are two distinct political movements. Fatah, the faction that has dominated Palestinian life for nearly 40 years, is a national movement. Through the 1993 Oslo peace process, it accepted the principle of a two-state solution. Hamas is a religious movement that rejects such a solution, opposes Israel's existence and seeks an Islamic state in all of historic Palestine.

Their coexistence in a national unity government was bound to be tenuous. Last week, when Hamas acted to vanquish the Fatah forces in Gaza, it probably sought to use its hold on Gaza as a lever to force Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to make concessions on matters of governance and Hamas' role in the most important institutions in Palestinian life -- the Palestine National Council and the PLO. Instead, Abbas declared an emergency, fired the Hamas prime minister and ended the unity government. Now we effectively have two Palestinian regimes: Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza.

What should be done?

- First and foremost, recognize that Hamas might be strong in Gaza, but that Gaza could end up being a poison pill for it. Gaza is impoverished; unemployment is about 70%. It has become a lawless, anarchic entity with dozens of militias operating. If Hamas wants to rule Gaza with help from the outside, then it must act responsibly. At the same time, it must be stopped from acquiring more weaponry, and Egypt is the key to stopping the smuggling. To date, its efforts have been limited and inconsistent. Egypt can do more. It is also time to enlist the Europeans, Saudis and

others to focus on this issue. Absent that, Hamas will continue to acquire rockets of longer range. Sooner or later, it will trigger a new war with Israel, if for no other reason than to divert attention from its failings in Gaza.

- Second, to prevent the West Bank from becoming dominated by Hamas as well, it is time for Fatah to carry out reform and remake itself. In talks I recently held in Ramallah, Abu Dis and East Jerusalem, I saw a readiness for the first time to organize Fatah at the grassroots level and respond to the social and economic needs of the Palestinian public. In effect, the younger generation of Fatah appears committed to showing it can embody social justice and fight the corruption that has plagued the movement. With Salaam Fayyad as the new prime minister, the donor community -- including specifically the Saudis -- needs to focus on a strategy for working with Fayyad to bolster those who will provide services and programs and who will enhance the credibility of Fatah. If the Saudis don't want Iran to be able to exploit the Palestinian conflict, they need to ensure that Hamas does not come to dominate the cause in a way that guarantees enduring struggle.

- Third, Israel needs to coordinate with Fayyad and others who are committed to coexistence and who seek to improve the day-to-day realities for Palestinians. Israel must help Palestinian leaders who are competing with Hamas show that they can deliver on the ground. Reconciling security needs with Palestinian progress will be more important than ever.

- Finally, the Bush administration needs to focus on making sure that by the end of its term, Hamas has not come to dominate the Palestinian cause. That requires cutting off Hamas from weaponry while helping Fatah remake itself and deliver on the ground.

Now is the time to turn the West Bank into a model of success, in contrast to Hamas' failures in Gaza. The Middle East needs more exemplars of success for moderates and of failure for Islamists.

Dennis Ross is former U.S. envoy to the Middle East under Presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush and author of [Statecraft, And How to Restore America's Standing in the World](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270>). ❖

USA Today

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

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

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

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

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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