

# As Palestinians Come Together, What Is Next for U.S.-Israeli Cooperation?

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Mar 16, 2007

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## Brief Analysis

**N**ext week, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will return to the Middle East, where she plans to meet Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas for what has become a monthly trilateral session. The question is whether Rice still believes both parties can actually agree on a so-called "political horizon" -- namely, the definition of actions to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The odds have slimmed to nearly nil since the idea was first discussed by Rice and Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni at a December 2006 meeting. That was prior to the Mecca accord, where the concept of a Palestinian national unity government was conceived. Meanwhile, both Fatah and Hamas have announced that they are ready to form such a government.

It is ironic that the same accord that gave birth to the idea of the Palestinian unity government seems to be creating fissures between the United States, Europe, and Israel. Though Hamas is clearly delighted by the prospect of a unity government, it is unlikely that the organization will be able to normalize international ties -- even with Europe -- in the coming months.

### Looking at the Rice-Livni Relationship

At the heart of Rice's diplomatic efforts has been a strong relationship with Livni. While Prime Minister Olmert repeatedly thanks Rice in public, he is clearly skeptical of her ability to catalyze a breakthrough at a time when both he and Abbas are politically weak. Livni is the one high-ranking Israeli government official who has believed in Rice's ideas, and each holds the other's intellect and pragmatism in high esteem. Both liked the idea of a political horizon, though for different reasons.

For Rice, the idea's success would not only provide a personal legacy as secretary of state, but also demonstrate to both Europe and the Arab world that a broad-based coalition on Iran does not preclude U.S. activism on the Arab-Israeli front. The latter is of particular importance, as it may be viewed by Europeans and Arabs as removing the "Palestinian card" from the hand of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad. Rice seems to be persuaded by Abbas's view that an alternative, open-ended interim deal would be seen in the Palestinian community as a dead end. In contrast, Livni initially saw the political horizon as an opportunity for Abbas to sharpen his differences with Hamas. Livni thinks Israel is better off seeking a negotiated tradeoff of territory for refugees now -- meaning that

Israel would yield much of the West Bank in return for a guarantee that refugees will not be allowed to return to Israel, only to the new Palestinian state.

Since Rice and Livni did not come to the idea of the political horizon from the same direction, the emergence of fault lines is not surprising. There is little indication that the United States and Israel have engaged in any "red-lines" talks on what concessions Israel can or cannot make as part of an entire package. Without that bilateral confidence, it is possible that Israel sees every trilateral meeting on the issue as a potential U.S.-Palestinian diplomatic ambush. Some will invariably wonder whether Rice -- who has put little focus on Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy from the time that former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon initiated the Gaza withdrawal -- does not fully appreciate the nuances of final-status issues. Furthermore, since Mecca, Livni sees little chance that a political-horizon deal will widen the differences between Abbas and Hamas founder Ismail Haniyeh.

Israel's trepidation is matched by Washington's sense that the reordering of communication lines in the U.S.-Israeli relationship has not worked out as hoped. During much of the first five years of the Bush administration, the key Israeli interlocutor was Sharon's personal envoy and attorney, Dov Weisglass, with the U.S. counterpart often in the White House. In the post-Sharon era, the United States was hoping that the key axis would be between Rice and Livni. However, amid ongoing tensions between Olmert and Livni, it is reasonable to wonder whether Washington will reconsider its strategy.

#### Relating to a Palestinian National Unity Government

It will be interesting to see how the United States and Israel react now that the Palestinian national unity government deal is sealed. Both countries have muted their antipathy toward the Mecca accord, in no small measure because they see the Saudis as pivotal in the broader coalition on Iran.

For his part, Olmert publicly announced that Israel will not talk to Fatah ministers in the new parliament. He will continue to speak to Abbas, however, who was elected a year before the Hamas victory, when 62 percent of voters favored a two-state solution. In contrast, European officials privately plan to speak to Fatah ministers, including Finance Minister Salaam Fayad, ending the unified Quartet boycott of diplomacy that has been in place since the January 2006 Hamas parliamentary victory.

The United States has yet to make up its mind on contacts. European officials view the Mecca accord as a step forward rather than as a liability. While they would like to meet with Hamas, they know that doing so would unravel Quartet unity at a time when they hope for Rice's success. Amid the difficulties that both Fatah and Hamas have faced in putting a unity government together -- and the fact that differences between the two parties are so great that the resulting government could easily fall apart -- the European Union is going to pursue a "wait and see" attitude.

#### Arab Summit, Arab Initiative

Amid differing viewpoints on the Palestinian national unity government and the political horizon, there are no signs that Arab world will use the Arab Summit later this month as a means to bolster the "center" in Israel. Arab League secretary-general Amr Mousa has announced that the Arab League will not modify the 2002 initiative, which makes clear that the league will only normalize ties with Israel after the latter has yielded the entire West Bank, east Jerusalem, and Golan, and permitted an unlimited number of Palestinian refugees to return to Israel.

While the world focuses on diplomacy as a way to bolster Abbas, there is little understanding outside Israel that a lack of movement toward the Olmert government is bound to bolster Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu, who towers over Olmert in the polls. Amid an upcoming judicial report that is expected to blame Olmert for the handling of the summer 2006 war in Lebanon, and a variety of corruption allegations that could end Olmert's tenure, it seems the one group that could bolster Olmert has been rather indifferent. Arabs will deny this is the case, but the 2002 initiative has no chance of implementation. While Arabs present it as a take-it-or-leave-it proposition, with no room

for negotiation, they know full well that Israel cannot accept. Only an explicit announcement that the Arab initiative is negotiable could lead to a reassessment of its potential viability.

Even apart from the issue of the 2002 initiative, it seems the upcoming Arab Summit is being wasted. There is no discernible U.S. effort to use the event as a springboard for progress, nor did the recent speech of Jordan's King Abdullah, given in a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress, provide any sign that the Arab states will provide Abbas with needed political cover on critical issues in efforts toward a historic compromise. Indeed, one wonders whether analysts will look back on all of 2007 as a time of wasted opportunities. For all their prodigious political weaknesses, both Olmert and Abbas are pragmatic politicians. If the Arab world cannot provide the political backing for a historic compromise, it should not be surprised by the consequences, including more political turmoil within Israel and a grinding Israeli-Palestinian stalemate.

David Makovsky, a senior fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute, is coauthor of the Institute Policy Focus [Lessons and Implications of the Israel-Hizballah War: A Preliminary Assessment](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=251) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=251>). ❖

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