

# Palestinian Parliament Delays Vote on Referendum Recognizing Israel

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.

On June 12, 2006, David Makovsky appeared on the PBS program NewsHour with Jim Lehrer along with Hisham Melhem; they were interviewed by NewsHour senior correspondent Margaret Warner. The following is a transcript of of the program.

MARGARET WARNER: And for more now, we're joined by Hisham Melhem, Washington bureau chief for the Lebanese newspaper An-Nahar. He also hosts a weekly program on the Arab satellite channel al-Arabiya.

And David Makovsky, director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He's a former editor and diplomatic correspondent at the Jerusalem Post and Haaretz newspapers.

Welcome, Hisham, David.

So, Hisham, here we have Palestinian security forces storming two Palestinian government buildings. How has it come to this?

HISHAM MELHEM: Well, you have a rivalry between the Palestinian Authority, headed by Mahmoud Abbas, and the Hamas government and Hamas-controlled parliament. Two conflicting political visions, two conflicting outlooks on how to deal with the Israelis and how to build Palestinian societies.

And you have a tremendous political stalemate between these two groups. And the stalemate is being played out against the background of deteriorating economic conditions, given the international boycott of the Palestinian Authority, against the background of a war—and we have to call it a war between the Israelis and some Palestinian factions, particularly the Muslim militants—which leads sometimes Palestinians to fire indiscriminately these crude rockets, Qassam rockets, against Israel.

The Israelis retaliate sometimes indiscriminately and recklessly, as we've seen on Saturday, with killing seven civilians.

Mahmoud Abbas is trying to break this stalemate by calling for a referendum. He was trying to force Hamas to play their hands and to take a position. And he says—and I think he's correct—this is his own way of trying to break the international blockade against the Palestinian government.

The way it's crafted now doesn't support a two-state solution. It legitimizes attacks in certain areas. And it's a shame, because this could have been a bombshell in Israel and internationally, in a positive way.

MARGARET WARNER: David, explain more about the trigger for this, which is this referendum that Abbas wants to call or says he's going to call. Now, one, why has it become such a flash point? And explain, why is Abbas doing this? Why is Hamas so opposed?

DAVID MAKOVSKY: OK. Abbas, I think, sees that there are benefits for him. One is, if he puts forward this referendum, he'll be relevant. He'll be relevant in the internal Palestinian arena. People have been saying that he was weak, that he was ineffectual.

MARGARET WARNER: Relevant—yes.

DAVID MAKOVSKY: And now he's standing up to Hamas. Second, he hopes he could maybe reshuffle the deck internationally. Maybe he will lead to more financial assistance and the like.

And I think that what his hope is, that he's articulating this is where the Palestinians really are. Because I believe he believes in a two-state solution, I think it's a terrible missed opportunity, because you could put forward a referendum that would be very unambiguous.

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MARGARET WARNER: But yet . . .

DAVID MAKOVSKY: And it's still too much for Hamas.

MARGARET WARNER: But let's just explain very briefly, basically, the referendum proposal would say—they call for a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and implicitly, in the view of some, that seems to recognize that there will be another state, which will be Israel.

DAVID MAKOVSKY: Right. Right. It says the 1967 borders, but it doesn't say that's the end, that that's the final step.

MARGARET WARNER: There are many other elements.

DAVID MAKOVSKY: Yes, right. And there are other elements, too. It does say primarily the terror attacks should be in the West Bank and Gaza. But for him, it is important. Domestically, this is important for Abbas to assert himself. And I just wish he was more forthright and he could have reshuffled the deck in peacemaking, as well.

MARGARET WARNER: OK, but explain a little more. Why is Hamas so opposed to this? Is it because they think they'll be—that the Palestinian people might actually vote for this, and then it would be apparent that the Palestinian people want a solution?

HISHAM MELHEM: Every opinion poll shows a great majority of Palestinians, 75-80 percent of Palestinians, supporting the two-state solution, a Palestinian state within 1967 borders living alongside with Israel.

Hamas will be forced to play its hand, if Mahmoud Abbas resuscitates his presidency and makes himself the leading Palestinian interlocutor in any negotiations. They don't want that; they want to be vague.

Hamas would have preferred to be left alone by the Israelis and by the international community so that they will be given the time to consolidate their control over the authority and over the institutions that were built by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) before, which are still manned by essentially PLO loyalists.

Hamas wants to get some money from the Europeans, and the Arabs, and the Muslim countries, but they wanted to be left alone. Now, Mahmoud Abbas, by this referendum, is forcing them to play their hand politically, and to take certain positions, and to go on the record that, "We accept essential a two-state solution," something that they have been avoiding.

MARGARET WARNER: Now, Hisham, do you think that—meanwhile, on the Palestinian-Israeli track, we've also seen

this escalation of violence. Hamas is now saying the cease-fire no longer exists. What do you think that's going to mean? Do you think this violence is really going to go to a new level or back to an old level? Do you think we'll see more suicide attacks?

HISHAM MELHEM: I think Hamas would prefer to continue to abide by the hudna, the so-called truce. And I think the suspension of this hudna will probably be temporary.

On the other hand, you have the smaller factions, the Islamic Jihad and the others, who are not committed to this and they will continue to fire these rockets just to score points or to remain, quote, unquote, "relevant," also, within the Palestinian community.

I would expect probably more attacks, but what is more dangerous for the Palestinians and for the international community, for that matter, unless this Palestinian-Palestinian violence is stopped—which claimed, by the way, seventeen people in the last month only—this could generate into a greater civil strife, and it will spill over, and this will enrage many people in the Arab world.

Already, you have a tinderbox situation in Gaza. Gaza is probably the most miserable place on Earth. And unless something is done by the United States, by the Israelis, by the Palestinian leadership, helping Abbas to get out of this mess, we will have a tragedy on our hands.

MARGARET WARNER: David, the Israeli-Palestinian violence, where do you think this is headed? Are the Israeli expecting a resumption of suicide attacks?

DAVID MAKOVSKY: Yes, I think it's very possible there will be a resumption of suicide attacks, because, look, you've had about seven hundred of these attacks from northern Gaza, even though the Israelis are all gone, since the fall. And . . .

MARGARET WARNER: The rocket attacks, which rarely—they never killed anybody.

DAVID MAKOVSKY: They've killed several people . . .

MARGARET WARNER: Have they?

DAVID MAKOVSKY: . . . but the point here is, is that, if Hamas says if there's a cease-fire, people will say, "Well, you know, just restrain them. Israel isn't even occupying Gaza anymore."

And, you know, Americans open up their TV sets every morning and say, "It was another suicide bombing in Baghdad today." Israelis open up their radios in the morning and they hear, "Another Qassam rockets in these northern towns."

And what it's done is it's strained Olmert politically, because he came to power—he was just in the U.S. Congress a few weeks ago, very well-received. But the Israeli public says all these ceremonies in Washington are very nice, but if we don't like the book, why would we see the movie?

If you can't get Gaza under control, then why should we trust you to start pulling out of most of the West Bank? So he's down to 35 percent in the polls because of the violence, and that has to change.

MARGARET WARNER: Now, do you think—let me just get back to the Palestinian versus Palestinian. Do you, David, think that—what we saw today was pretty violent, pretty extreme. Do you think we could actually see a civil war?

DAVID MAKOVSKY: Look, I don't know if it would be like gray coats and blue coats, like we have in our American Civil War. Each side says they don't want a fitna, a Palestinian civil war.

And I agree with Hisham. There has been conflicting visions now for over a decade that have been swept under the rug. What is our view on the monopoly of the use of force? What is our view of religion and state? Do we really believe

in a two-state solution?

Until now, you could be defined against Israel. We know what you stand against; what do you stand for? That has not been resolved.

And now we're seeing all this kind of erupt. And I would just say one line here on this, and then—when Israel was really born in 1948, it wasn't when they signed that declaration, but when Israel fired on a ship when there was a rival militia bringing in arms. Unless the Palestinian government has a monopoly on the use of force, there's no hope.

MARGARET WARNER: Do you think we're headed for a civil war?

HISHAM MELHEM: No, we're heading probably to a greater civil strife. And it may be technical, and I don't think it will probably be degenerative to full-fledged . . .

MARGARET WARNER: What do you mean technical?

HISHAM MELHEM: I mean, sometimes the line separating, you know, civil strife and full-fledged civil war, we have seen that movie in Iraq. I mean, we have been discussing whether Iraq is in a state of civil war or on the verge of state of civil war.

But we talk about Olmert's losing support. We talk about Abbas losing support. And it doesn't help Abbas when Olmert says that he's irrelevant; it doesn't help Abbas when the United States is not thinking creatively to come up with solutions to this mess that we have now, because everybody is now busy with Iraq.

Only the Europeans are trying to think creatively. The Arabs are not doing it; the Israelis are not doing it.

DAVID MAKOVSKY: Olmert doesn't say he's irrelevant, Hisham. He says the opposite. He says, "I've got to work with him."

HISHAM MELHEM: No, no, but, I mean, Olmert said he doesn't control his own government on CNN. Come on.

CROSSTALK

DAVID MAKOVSKY: He said that—he said it today with Blair, too. The unilateral idea is the second best hope . . .

CROSSTALK

HISHAM MELHEM: You don't want to deal with Hamas; I don't want to deal with Hamas. A majority of Palestinians supports a two-state solution. Deal with the moderate forces.

And that's why—I mean, there is a dearth of creative thinking in the United States, and in Israel, and in the Arab world on this issue. Probably only the Europeans are trying to scratch their heads to come up with something creative. And we are watching a catastrophe evolving there, and then we're going to feel sorry afterward because we didn't do enough, all of us.

MARGARET WARNER: All right, Hisham, David, thank you. ❖

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