

Twentieth Anniversary Soref Symposium: Israeli-Palestinian Relations at a Crossroads

May 19, 2005



In-Depth Reports

On May 19, 2005, Hassan Abu Libdeh addressed The Washington Institute's Soref Symposium. Hassan Abu Libdeh is the Palestinian Authority (PA) minister of labor and social affairs. Previously, he served as secretary of the PA cabinet and chief of staff to Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei. He has also served as director of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics and as a professor at Bir Zeit University.

It is important for Israelis and Palestinians to look forward, not backward. Both peoples could debate for ages the sins they have committed against each other. Indeed, neither party is innocent. Palestinians could list the Israeli military's various inflammatory actions in the West Bank and Gaza, highlighting the manner in which these activities undermine the efforts of Mahmoud Abbas. Instead, we would like to reassure the international community that President Abbas, his government, and his people are committed to a peaceful solution with the state of Israel. Our hands are extended to the Israeli government and the Israeli people to achieve this peace.

From Washington's perspective, it might not seem like President Abbas has accomplished much during his initial months in office. Yet, taking into consideration the Palestinian context -- four-and-a-half years of continuous suffering, violence, sieges, and closures -- he has been doing a great job leading his people on the path to peace. He has done well in terms of increasing public accountability and reshaping how the government functions. He has also done much to unite the Palestinian security forces, scaling them down from twelve to three. Indeed, the president has taken every initiative possible in light of his limited resources and the problems on the ground. He is trying to achieve his goals at a time when the Palestinian treasury is empty, 300,000 Palestinians are unemployed, and 64 percent of Palestinian households are living below the poverty line. He has taken these hardships into consideration with each decision he makes, and he deserves every opportunity to continue down the path he has embarked on.

Palestinians and Israelis are now at a crossroads. If President Abbas succeeds in his endeavors over the next few months, both sides will soon be sitting together for final-status negotiations.

The upcoming Gaza disengagement is an important opportunity for significant progress. Unfortunately, the withdrawal plan in its current form does not represent a step forward on the Quartet Roadmap to Israeli-Palestinian peace; rather, it is a recipe for continued Palestinian suffering. There are 1.5 million Palestinians in Gaza who deserve a better life and a concerted effort to achieve peaceful coexistence with Israel. The current disengagement plan -- which leaves Gaza's borders under Israeli control, phases out Palestinian labor in Israel, and calls for little direct investment in Gaza -- will only lead to more hardship for the Palestinian people.

Evacuating 2,000 homes and returning 7,000 settlers to Israel is an important and courageous step for Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon to take. Yet, even as 2,000 homes are set to be dismantled in Gaza, 6,500 new settler homes are being built in the West Bank. As much as Palestinians are requested to abide by the first phase of the Roadmap and cease violence against Israelis everywhere, the same first phase requires Israel to halt settlement activity, dismantle outposts, and refrain from violence against Palestinians.

Accordingly, even as the whole world focuses on the Gaza disengagement, there should be equal focus on Israel's activities in the West Bank. Israel continues to expand West Bank settlements, construct a separation wall deep into Palestinian territory, and take actions that isolate Jerusalem from the West Bank. These activities will not bring us closer to peace; rather, they will create obstacles when it comes time for final-status negotiations.

Given these problems, President Abbas's upcoming visit to the United States will be a golden opportunity for Washington to empower him. Palestinians have grown weary of official declarations offering more of the same. The United States should enable President Abbas to continue his efforts toward fulfilling Roadmap commitments so that he can bring Israel to the negotiating table as soon as possible. The Palestinian Authority has stated repeatedly that it is willing to begin negotiations with Israel on final-status issues. With the proper sponsorship from Washington and the Quartet, we would be able to reach a conclusion by the end of 2005 and establish a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel. Palestinians are ready to make the concessions necessary for reaching a solution. What we lack is a third party with the requisite will to bring the two sides together to work on these issues.

President Abbas is not the weak leader some would make him out to be. Certainly, he is considering the internal dynamics of Palestinian society before taking certain actions. If he is pushed to act prematurely, he will lose all that he has achieved. Instead of characterizing him as a weak president, Israel should work with him and help him produce results. He would welcome any Israeli-Palestinian dialogue that could bring prosperity to the two populations. For example, according to established agreements, the West Bank and Gaza should be linked by a safe passage. This passage could take any form that is satisfactory to both sides. Whatever the case, all parties must keep the basic parameters of the peace process in sight if they hope to produce an outcome that is just for both the Palestinians and the cause of peace.

Again, the United States should work with Israelis and Palestinians alike. Both sides need a third party that can see the potential dividends of peace. At the moment, neither side can see these dividends clearly; they need a third party to bring them together toward a better future for both nations.

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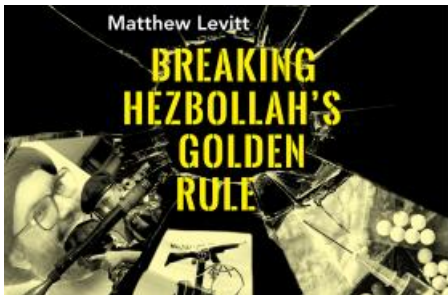
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