

Assessing the Upcoming Bush-Sharon Summit: Clarifying Ambiguity

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.



Brief Analysis

One way to judge the success of the upcoming Bush-Sharon summit in Crawford is by examining whether it leads to a meeting of the minds and greater clarity on four pivotal Israeli-Palestinian issues: the terms of the current ceasefire; West Bank settlement activity; the timing of, and eligibility rules for, Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections; and whether disengagement will be coordinated with the Palestinians. Lack of clarity on these issues may be useful in the immediate term, but sweeping them under the rug is bound to exacerbate problems in the run-up to the historic disengagement in late July 2005, when Israel will begin to dismantle twenty-one settlements in Gaza and four in the northern West Bank. Needless to say, U.S.-Israel coordination is a necessary but not sufficient condition, as internal Palestinian, U.S.-Palestinian, and Israel-Palestinian consultations will be required on most of these matters. Bush and Sharon should also consider concrete actions that could bolster the struggling government of Mahmoud Abbas, though supplementing rather than substituting for the Palestinians' own actions.

Defining the Ceasefire

In March, Palestinian factions met in Cairo and agreed to a de facto ceasefire, which they call tahdiya (calming down). The agreement was supplemented by understandings reached between Israeli and Palestinian security officials in Amman, which made clear that Israel will not arrest the 495 suspects on its most-wanted list or ask the Palestinian Authority (PA) to do so. Rather, Israel conditioned further concessions (e.g., exiting from all West Bank cities) on the PA disarming these suspects and barring them from intercity travel. While senior Palestinian security officials acknowledge this understanding, they admit that they have not translated it into action. Moreover, such understandings have not been publicly announced, leading the Palestinian public to believe that the PA has upheld its ceasefire obligations. As such, Palestinians believe that Israel has been pernicious in not lifting more checkpoints, even when Israel insists that the number of such posts has been reduced by half over the past year. The lack of visible progress generates support for Hamas, which will contest parliamentary elections this summer for the first time. Therefore, it is critical that the ceasefire terms be publicly clarified and implemented; so far, there is no evidence that the U.S. security representative on the ground, Gen. William "Kip" Ward, has been able to make that happen.

This problem is exacerbated by two factors. First, amid pressure from the old guard, Abbas has delayed signing a law passed by the PLC that would pension off 2,000 members of the security services over the age of sixty and then restructure the services themselves. Abbas knows there will be little point to his planned Washington visit later this month unless this reform process has begun. Second, Israel's Shin Bet is preoccupied with its search for Jewish extremists who may be planning radical action to derail disengagement. Accordingly, Israel will be more wary than usual about relaxing security measures absent a clear direction for the Palestinian security services. The United States must therefore take steps to ensure that the terms of the ceasefire are known and adhered to by all parties.

Settlement Blocs

The nature of most summits is to sweep contentious issues under the rug in order to demonstrate success. This will probably occur in Crawford, as both Bush and Sharon seek to avoid meaningful resolution on the issue of settlement activity in West Bank blocs near the pre-1967 border. An estimated 176,000 settlers (74 percent of the West Bank total) live in blocs that take up 8 percent of West Bank territory, most of it near the Green Line. Bush's April 14, 2004, policy letter to Sharon made clear that such "population centers" should be taken into account in any final-status deal. Hence, Sharon believes that Israel should be permitted to continue building within these blocs now. He also sees such construction as a means of tempering the heated opposition to disengagement within his own Likud Party. Yet, Washington is concerned about the impact of such activity on Abbas's domestic standing. The U.S. position is that treating blocs as subject to future negotiation is not synonymous with sanctioning settlement activity in these areas now. As recently as April 5, Bush stated that such activity is not consistent with the Roadmap. Sharon's view is that he is not bound by the Roadmap's call for a settlement freeze as long as the Palestinians fail to dismantle the infrastructure of terrorism; both measures are required under Phase I.

Bush and Sharon will likely agree to disagree on such issues as the building of 3,500 units in E-1, the area joining Jerusalem with the settlement of Maale Adumim, particularly since Israel's plan does not call for actual construction to begin there until years from now. If the issue of building inside settlement blocs is not resolved now, however, it will resurface in the months ahead and remain a source of friction. Sharon will undoubtedly argue that, during the Camp David 2000 era, Bill Clinton, Ehud Barak, and even the Palestinians acknowledged that most such blocs will ultimately become part of Israel. One way out would be for Washington to condition any relaxation in the U.S. attitude toward the blocs on a public commitment by Sharon to immediately freeze settlements outside the blocs and fix a date for completing the "ring road" around Jerusalem. The latter measure would facilitate travel between Ramallah and Bethlehem, thus easing concerns about activity in and around Maale Adumim. The road was announced at an Israeli cabinet meeting on February 20, 2005, but no completion date was mentioned.

PLC Elections

Concerns about the Palestinian Legislative Council elections hinge on two major issues-eligibility and timing. Should Hamas members be eligible to run for office even though the organization has not renounced terrorism or disarmed? Clearly, Hamas would like the terms that Hizballah enjoys in Lebanon-namely, running while retaining its arms and terrorist capabilities. The argument that the political process will moderate Hamas over time may or may not be true, but such a change is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

The timing of the elections is a key issue as well. Currently, they are scheduled to take place on July 17. Israel's disengagement is scheduled for July 20, even though the actual pullout will probably not begin until the July 25. Substantial Hamas electoral victories could therefore cast a pall on the pullout. Sharon would likely move ahead anyway, but the disengagement would clearly be more difficult under such conditions. Many believe that Fatah would do better in the elections if they were held two months later-after rather than before Palestinians see the evacuation of Israeli settlements. Yet, as with other crucial issues, there is no dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians on timing. Those Palestinians who believe that Hamas could score electoral victories point not to the

date of the election but rather to the perceived lack of Israeli progress on checkpoints, the disarray of Fatah, and recent shows of force by Hamas. Last week, Hamas staged two major demonstrations in the West Bank commemorating the assassination of leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin; at least 20,000 demonstrators participated in Hebron, and 10,000 in Bethlehem.

Obviously, this is a delicate issue. Neither the United States nor Israel want to be seen as interfering in Palestinian elections. Indeed, critics could seize upon any public indications of a delay, deliberately conflating the timing issue with the broader issue of democratization and arguing that Washington and Israel favor Palestinian democracy only when the result is to their liking.

Rather than changing the election date, the parties could pursue other, more preferable, alternatives. There is sufficient economic and political momentum on the ground to bolster Fatah's prospects between now and July. On the economic side, the United States could work with the PA, Israel, and others in coordinating an urgent economic plan that would shore up the Abbas government and demonstrate quick results to the public. On the political side, the Palestinian old guard could acquiesce to appeals by the young guard to hold an open Fatah primary involving 200,000 Palestinians.

Failing these alternatives, Fatah may indeed conclude that a September election is preferable to July. Otherwise, Hamas is likely to make major political gains at a crucial juncture and perhaps win an outright parliamentary victory. In any event, public declarations by the United States and Israel are not needed as much as an understanding in Crawford that a problem exists and that urgent consultations with the Palestinians are required to address this issue now.

Disengagement

Before Yasser Arafat's death, Sharon insisted that the Israeli disengagement be unilateral. Since then, however, he has indicated his willingness to coordinate the move, even if he will not negotiate its basic contours. In order to ensure a smooth transfer, Abbas has made clear that he desires coordination as well. Yet, such cooperation is being blocked by PA prime minister Ahmed Qurei (a.k.a. Abu Ala), who on an array of issues has proven to be more interested in power than governance. As such, he is more of an impediment than a partner to Abbas. Potential areas of coordination are many, ranging from military issues to the future of settlement assets (e.g., greenhouses) that could be of use to Palestinians in Gaza. There is no indication that Washington has made any effort to mediate between the parties to ensure such coordination. The stakes could not be higher, though-the success or failure of disengagement is likely to be the prism through which both publics refract their expectations regarding the future of peacemaking.

Conclusion

There is an expectations gap between Israelis and Palestinians on several crucial issues. Without U.S. effort, this gap will widen, deleteriously affecting all of the interrelated issues. The Bush-Sharon summit is critical for tackling these issues, and it should be followed by U.S. consultations with the Abbas government and U.S.-led efforts to spur Israeli-Palestinian dialogue.

David Makovsky, senior fellow and the director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute, is author of the soon-to-be-published Institute monograph *Engagement through Disengagement: Gaza and the Potential for Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking*. ❖

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