

# Consolidating the Palestinian-Israeli Ceasefire

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Michael Herzog was appointed Israel's ambassador to the United States in 2021. Previously, he was an international fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

The February 8 Sharm al-Shaykh summit may have marked the definitive end of the Arafat era. Both Israeli and Palestinian leaders issued orchestrated parallel statements declaring cessation of hostilities and highlighted the resumption of bilateral engagement after almost four and a half years of armed confrontation. Within hours, however, militant Palestinian groups challenged these commitments through attacks on Israeli targets. To take full advantage of the opportunities now available will require active effort to consolidate the fledgling ceasefire. This includes imposing the full force of the Palestinian central authority against rejectionists, clarifying the ambiguities in the parallel commitments, and enlisting key states and international actors in the campaign to combat Iranian and Hizballah designs to undermine this fragile process.

Background: Recent Understandings on Security Issues

Events leading up to the summit indicated that both leaderships realize that stabilized security is the key to success in the major challenges now facing them: Palestinian reforms and institution-building, a smooth Israeli pullout from Gaza and the northern West Bank, and reopening the way toward peace. The deployment of Palestinian policemen in flash points in Gaza and the hammering out of a general ceasefire understanding between Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and some of the militant groups reduced Palestinian rocket and mortar firing as well as other terror attacks in and from Gaza. Israeli-Palestinian security dialogue was resumed between Israeli defense minister Shaul Mofaz and top Palestinian security aide Muhammad Dahlan, as well as between officers on the ground. Israel scaled down its operational activities in populated Palestinian areas and reopened the Rafah, Karni, and Erez crossing points on the border of Gaza. Israel also decided to begin a gradual transfer of security responsibility from Israeli to Palestinian hands in West Bank cities, starting with Jericho; to release 900 Palestinian prisoners not involved in the murder of Israelis; and to examine, in consultation with the Palestinians, possible future release of pre-Oslo prisoners "with blood on their hands." Mofaz and Dahlan further agreed to establish a joint committee whose task will be to allow most Palestinian fugitives wanted by Israel to resume normal life after laying down their arms and renouncing violence.

In their summit meeting, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon reportedly added a promise to enable Palestinians to start construction of a seaport in Gaza. In return, he urged his Palestinian counterpart to make an effort to ensure a smooth Israeli disengagement from Gaza. In essence, this was the kickoff of Israeli-Palestinian coordination of the

disengagement.

### A Vague and Precarious Ceasefire

The Israeli prime minister gave the more detailed version of the summit ceasefire understandings when he said in his speech: "...We agreed that all Palestinians will stop all acts of violence against all Israelis everywhere and [in parallel], Israel will cease all its military activity against all Palestinians anywhere." This is a general definition that calls for clarification.

In response, Hamas spokesmen announced that they are not bound by the ceasefire since its terms were not negotiated with them. They claimed they had merely agreed to a temporary cooling down period. Indeed, in contrast to Sharon's expanding definition of the truce, the ceasefire Abbas managed to secure from Palestinian militants toward the end of January was informal, partial (with only Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and some Fatah activists), temporary (thirty days), and conditional (dependent on Israeli measures).

The precariousness of the ceasefire was well demonstrated two days after the summit when Hamas launched a barrage of over forty mortars and rockets aimed at Israeli settlements in Gaza. Hamas explained that this was revenge for Israel killing two Palestinians the day before. The challenge to Abbas by this independent Hamas "deterrence equation" was compounded by local Gazans breaking into the central prison in Gaza and killing some prisoners in a bid to settle domestic accounts. Abbas reacted swiftly: he dismissed the senior police commanders in Gaza (veteran Arafat nominees who were mostly useless), issued a stern warning against violating the ceasefire, and ultimately got the leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza to reaffirm—once again in reserved, conditional, oral wording—their acceptance of the ceasefire. It was further agreed that these groups would first consult the Palestinian Authority (PA) in cases of Israeli activities that they deem worthy of a violent response. This kind of understanding falls short of the "single Authority, single law, single weapon" principle that Abbas has advocated.

### Urgent Need for Consolidation of the Ceasefire, Security Reform, and a Security Plan

The ceasefire hangs by a very thin thread. The first order of the day for Abbas is to consolidate it—to define it clearly, formally, and in terms equally understood and subscribed to by all the militant factions and by Israel, and to avoid setting a debilitating timeframe for it. Abbas can and should draw on Palestinian popular support for his policies, which Hamas is not likely to ignore while striving to establish itself politically in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Abbas can also draw on the external support afforded him by the international community, including regional players such as Egypt. No less important, Israel is willing to give Abbas a chance and provide him with supportive measures, in large part because it sees him as a needed partner to secure its smooth pullout from Gaza. But ultimately the ceasefire will not hold long if Abbas leaves it hinging on the goodwill of the extreme militants or tries to appease them through the release of funds and other measures. They need to know that he is willing to enforce the ceasefire, or else they will break it whenever they feel like it.

Abbas must use the borrowed time of the ceasefire to embark immediately on building his security power base through deep reform in the Palestinian security system: restructuring and consolidating the numerous corrupt and inefficient security services; appointing new, competent leaders; and training and educating the forces. Without such reform it is difficult to see him establishing his authority, assuming security responsibility in West Bank cities, and taking effective control over Gaza. Reform should not include, however, the intended incorporation into the security forces of militant fugitives who are prone to reengage in terror.

The current ceasefire does not forbid the militant groups from developing their own capabilities through manufacturing, testing, or smuggling. If not checked, they will utilize the ceasefire as a respite to enhance their own power, and then employ it to undercut Abbas's position and policies and to turn the Israeli disengagement from Gaza into a better starting point for the resumption of their violent attacks. The Palestinian leadership should therefore

develop a meaningful security plan that will take on the terror infrastructure, and prepare to implement it by the time the Israelis pull out of Gaza. This plan is in the PA's own interest and is a stipulation of the first phase of the Roadmap.

#### Time for Active American/International Role in the Security Field

This very sensitive moment calls for an active U.S. role on the security front. The nomination of Lt. Gen. William E. Ward as security coordinator is a step in the right direction. It is no wonder that Hamas has been publicly labeling his nomination as an attempt “to push Palestinian security apparatus to take action against Hamas.” It is important that General Ward set to work as soon as possible, clarify with both Palestinians and Israelis the exact terms of the ceasefire, monitor it, and start working with the PA on the challenges of security reform and a meaningful security plan. At the same time, the international community should take action to curb Iran and Hizballah, who, according to Palestinian and Israeli reports, have recently stepped up their efforts to fuel the situation and undermine the ceasefire.

Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog (Israel Defense Forces), formerly the senior military aide to Israel’s minister of defense and an Israeli peace negotiator, is currently a visiting military fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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