

The Era of Mahmoud Abbas: Prospects for Security, Peace, and Reform

by [Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](/experts/michael-herzog)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](/experts/michael-herzog)

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

If new Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas is to succeed, he must deal with the issue of violence. Over the past year, positive changes have emerged in all areas of Palestinian public opinion except one: the role of violence. In the eyes of the public, violence pays. Three-fourths of Palestinians perceive the disengagement as a victory for violence. To be sure, more than two-thirds of Palestinians believe that Abbas should negotiate with Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon. Yet, the public views Israel's unilateral moves as a threat, not an asset. They see only settlements, closures, checkpoints, and humiliation. These perceptions are responsible for their anger. Abbas must help remove dynamics that encourage the public to believe in the utility of violence; otherwise, the issue will continue to impede his ability to govern effectively.

When Fatah convinced Marwan Barghouti to pull out of the presidential race, it effectively deferred resolving the question of violence. Fatah did so in the hope that the issue would eventually resolve itself, through either a return to violence or a change in public opinion. Yet, the issue must be decided by July 2005, when parliamentary elections are likely to occur. Fatah must be able stand up for one position; otherwise, the movement will split.

Corruption

Palestinian public opinion has changed for the worse on questions of governmental legitimacy, particularly with regard to corruption. During the municipal elections held recently in some parts of Gaza, Hamas candidates did much better than Fatah candidates, highlighting the prevailing perception among Palestinians that Fatah is not fit to govern at the local level. When Palestinians are asked about corruption, a majority of them think the problem will worsen under Abbas. This is a serious disability that the new president will have to deal with soon, given the pressure of the upcoming elections in many West Bank municipalities and, later, for the parliament.

If Abbas does not move quickly to change the public perception of corruption, Islamists will likely win control over the local councils scheduled to hold elections in April. In order to avoid this scenario, he must crack down on corruption immediately. Various corrupt members of the old guard can be readily dismissed, but corrupt young guard figures are much more difficult to handle because they are more dangerous. If they decide to challenge Abbas, they can put tremendous strain on his authority. Moreover, the Fatah Central Committee would likely try to prevent

him from going after such figures because many of the committee's senior members are themselves deeply involved in corruption.

Regardless of these obstacles, Abbas must dismiss even his most trusted security officials if need be. There are many good officers in the security services and elsewhere who could do the job just as effectively. Currently, all signs indicate that, when it comes to the most sensitive functions, he is using individuals who are perceived to be kings of corruption. He believes it necessary to deal with such individuals because they are instrumental in delivering security, but they will eventually destroy Fatah's ability to win the hearts and minds of the people and, in turn, local elections.

MICHAEL HERZOG

Stabilizing the Security Situation

Since Yasser Arafat passed away, the frequency of terrorist incidents in Gaza has increased sharply, culminating in the deadly January 13 attack at the Karni crossing. Through these attacks, militants have attempted to send a message to both Israel and Abbas. They want to show Israel that it will be leaving Gaza under fire, and that the disengagement will be cast as a victory for their armed struggle. Hamas in particular has a strong interest in encouraging such perceptions. The militants also want Abbas to know that they are committed to continuing their struggle. To his credit, Abbas understands how high the stakes are and has reacted quickly. He went to Gaza and ordered thousands of Palestinian policemen to stop the firing of Qassam rockets and other attacks on Israel. Indeed, he has the will, the public legitimacy, the tools, and the external support necessary to crackdown on terrorism. Since 2002, he has consistently called for a halt to the militarization of the intifada.

Even if a ceasefire is reached, however, the situation cannot remain calm for long if Abbas does not make serious efforts to preserve it. Israel is worried that Hamas will use any quiet period to regroup for future terrorist attacks. A ceasefire needs to be developed into a meaningful security plan that also addresses the terrorist infrastructure. Perhaps most important, no ceasefire should be time bound. Experience shows that any such time limit serves as a time bomb, with many planning for the day after the ceasefire and violence erupting anew on that date.

The United States could play a role in bridging gaps between Israelis and Palestinians. Specifically, it could help avoid a repeat of the 2003 ceasefire, when the agreement that the PA reached with Hamas differed on some key points with the agreement it reached with the IDF—differences that quickly caused the ceasefire to break down. Moreover, once a ceasefire is in effect, the United States could monitor it through a small team on the ground; only the United States has the capabilities, experience, information, and trust of both parties to fulfill such a role. It should not, however, look to enforce the ceasefire through armed forces, which would be counterproductive.

Smooth Disengagement

If the environment is fraught with violence, Abbas will not be able to deliver what he promised regarding Palestinian institution building and stabilization of the security services, nor will he be able to improve daily living conditions as Palestinians expect. Such an environment will also make it impossible to ensure a smooth disengagement from Gaza, because Israel is not likely to relax its security measures under terrorist attacks.

The final Israeli decision on disengagement will come within the next month. Although a majority in the Knesset supports Sharon's plan, there remains strong opposition to it. This situation will be a major test of Israeli democracy, showing to what extent the country is capable of carrying out the decision of a democratically elected government. In fact, some Israeli militants are willing to take up arms to prevent the removal of settlements. Yet, extreme circumstances would need to emerge for Israel to halt the disengagement; Sharon is very resolute. If Israelis come under fire during the disengagement, he will respond strongly. Similarly, if terrorist attacks persist from now until disengagement, there could be large-scale incursions into Gaza. Yet, such actions probably would not prevent

disengagement.

The day after the disengagement, discussions will begin as to what to do next. If the disengagement is smooth and quiet and viewed as a success, both sides can move toward talks. If the process unfolds under violence, however, it will discourage any Israeli government from continuing along such lines.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Andrew Eastman. ❖

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