

# Palestinian Stirrings

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Jan 2, 2005

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Something is stirring in Gaza. There is a sense of hope and possibility, a belief that it is time for a change. And there is a new discourse that includes all Palestinian factions and an open questioning of violence. I witnessed all this in an extraordinary event hosted in Gaza City by Ziad Abu Amr, a Palestinian legislator and chairman of the Palestinian Council on Foreign Relations.

He invited me to address a conference on the peace process. As I learned on my arrival in Gaza, he also invited leading members of what is euphemistically known as the "Palestinian Opposition" -- Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front -- to the event, and they were part of an audience of 200 people. In the morning they heard Mark Otte and Oleg Kalugin, peace coordinators of the European Union and Russia. In the afternoon, they heard Nabil Shaath, the Palestinian Authority's foreign minister, and me.

I was asked to speak about the role of the United States. Even before I spoke, I heard Otte and Kalugin challenged not on their own positions but on American behavior. The United States was charged with being biased, uncaring and a party to the punishment that Israel has inflicted on Palestinians. But in the midst of what was often a highly emotional litany of complaints and charges, I found this same Palestinian audience openly asking the official representatives of the European Union and Russia about Palestinian responsibilities. What is it, they asked, that Palestinians must do now?

As someone who probably dealt with Yasser Arafat more than any non-Palestinian, I can safely say that Palestinian responsibility was never on his agenda. Arafat made being a victim a strategy, not just a condition, and thus Palestinians were entitled, never responsible. Yet, here in Gaza, no one challenged those Palestinians who raised questions about their responsibilities. And while most of the comments directed to me were about America's responsibility to right the wrongs done to the Palestinians, some in the audience picked up my challenge to recognize that the United States could help the Palestinians only if they were prepared to fulfill their obligations, particularly on security. Indeed, when I declared that there would be no Palestinian state born of violence -- with the leading proponents of that violence sitting there -- several Palestinians responded by saying that violence was a mistake and nothing would be achieved by it.

What struck me about these comments was that there was no hesitancy to make them. With the opposition sitting

there, with the entire conference being conducted in Arabic and televised throughout the Middle East, declaring that violence against the Israelis was wrong bore no stigma and apparently little risk. Declaring that Palestinians had responsibilities to fulfill was also treated as legitimate, not sacrilegious.

Afterward, when I expressed surprise that neither the audience comments on violence nor my reference to the Palestinian obligation to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure drew rebuttals, Ziad and Samir Shawa (a leading Palestinian businessman) expressed no surprise. In their words, Palestinians wanted to see the violence end.

Remarkably, all this is happening in no small part because Arafat has passed from the scene. With him, there was paralysis not only between the Palestinians and the Israelis but also among the Palestinians. And Palestinians better than anyone else understand this. How else can one explain the changing Palestinian mood? Before Arafat's death, roughly 40 percent of Palestinians polled were optimistic about the future. Now the number is 59 percent. Before Arafat's death, Hamas's standing was higher than Fatah's -- 32 to 29 percent. The most recent polls show Fatah at 46 percent and Hamas at 17 percent. There should be no surprise here: When there is no hope, Hamas and all radical Islamists will always do better. But when there is hope and a sense of promise, the secularist nationalists in Fatah are seen as the most capable of delivering on that promise. (Hamas's apparent success in the initial municipal elections doesn't contradict this point; the local elections reveal less about large political trends and more about the weight of family, clan and highly localized issues.)

But with promise comes expectation. Life must get better, the Israeli siege must be lifted and a political pathway that offers the clear prospect of fulfilling national aspirations must be restored. Unfortunately, none of this will happen by itself. Israelis, who are now hopeful and open to helping the new Palestinian leadership, will understandably judge Mahmoud Abbas, after he is elected, by what he does, not what he says, to stop terror. And Palestinians remain far more likely to try to co-opt groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad than to confront them. That is why they will opt for a cease-fire, and why the Israelis will be highly suspicious that such a cease-fire would simply give Hamas and others the respite they need to rebuild the capability to carry out terrorism. It will take the active help of the United States to forge a common approach with common understandings on what a cease-fire is and isn't, and how it will relate to obligations both sides have on the "road map" for the peace process.

The stirrings I saw in Gaza demonstrate there is an opening. But the daily firings of rockets against the Israeli city of Sderot and the Gush Katif settlement -- and Israeli responses -- are reminders of how fragile and temporary that opening may be. Palestinians who believe in ending violence and in coexistence failed to deliver in the summer of 2003, when Abbas was prime minister. He and the reformers will shortly have a second chance. If they fail this time, they won't get a third.

The writer was special Middle East coordinator under President Bill Clinton and is now counselor of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He is the author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*. ❖

Washington Post

---

## RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley  
(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchetskaya  
(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson  
(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

### TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)