

# Getting Gaza Right

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Articles & Testimony

**T**he most frequent criticism of President Bush's Middle East policy is that he has been too hands-off. Unless America takes the lead, so the argument goes, the "peace process" will languish. In other words, U.S. activism is the key to progress.

This is, by and large, bad analysis and a bum rap. The level of activity--the frequency of presidential summits, White House meetings, shuttle diplomacy, signing ceremonies, and the like--is far less important than the direction of policy. And on the latter score, the Bush administration seems poised to reap dividends.

Bush's strategy depended on three pillars: U.S. recognition of Israel's right to respond to terrorism; U.S. commitment to the creation of a democratic Palestinian state alongside Israel; and U.S. refusal to truck with Palestinian leaders "compromised by terror." Each pillar was backed up with operational content, such as Washington's promise to veto one-sided anti-Israel resolutions at the U.N. Security Council, the administration's endorsement of a "road map" to Palestinian statehood, and the president's principled stand against dealing with Yasser Arafat after the latter lied about the 50 tons of shipborne weapons he tried to smuggle into Gaza.

After holding fast to these three pillars, the administration is about to enter a second term in which the prospects for substantial progress toward peace look brighter than at any point in years. Of course, it took an act of God--the death of Arafat--to sweep away the underbrush that impeded progress. But the administration's approach has been critical in at least two key respects.

First, Washington's support for Israel's right to self-defense emboldened a Likud-led Israeli government that had taken substantial security measures, such as the construction of the "separation fence," to see that its own interest was best served by a decision to withdraw from Gaza and the northern West Bank. This will include the dismantling of Jewish settlements there. When it occurs in mid-2005, Israel's "disengagement" will constitute a huge leap--both in psychology and in strategy--rivaling the original Oslo accords in historic importance.

Second, Washington's stand against terrorism and for a more democratic Palestinian leadership has emboldened those Palestinians who believe statehood will never be achieved through the barrel of a gun. For some, this is a question of morality ("terrorism is wrong"); for others, it is merely an issue of practicality ("terrorism plays into the hands of Israel"). But now that a champion of the "armed intifada," Marwan Barghouti, has dropped out of the

presidential race, Palestinian voters will almost certainly elect Mahmoud Abbas president of the Palestinian Authority on January 9. Abbas is no pushover on substantive issues, but he rejects the pistol-in-one-hand-and-olive-branch-in-the-other strategy that was Arafat's stock in trade.

These two key changes--Israel's disengagement and, if it occurs, the emergence of a new Palestinian leadership committed to a peaceful resolution of the conflict--will converge in 2005. The task for the administration is to capitalize on the moment to advance the prospect of a secure peace.

Two paths are possible. One can be termed "Diplomacy now!" Convinced that Arafat was himself the main impediment to peace, the administration could press both sides to reengage in high-level negotiations. The goal would be either a new set of Oslo-style interim deals or even the elusive final resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A second path comes under the banner of "Building for peace." This approach gives priority to sinking a firm foundation for each of the two new developments--Israeli disengagement and Palestinian political development--as the basis for further progress. It would focus on ensuring an orderly and peaceful transfer of authority in Gaza and the emergence of a Palestinian government that would merit, by its performance, generous terms over the West Bank and eventual entry into the community of sovereign states.

Each path has its advocates. Both will cunningly blur the distinctions between their two approaches. But these are two very different paths. Only one will lead to durable progress--the second approach.

"Diplomacy now!" may be emotionally satisfying, but it will have the practical effect of breaking Israel's already fragile government while forcing Palestinians to make a detour around internal reform. In contrast, the incremental approach will ensure that each party puts its own house in order as a prelude to tackling the difficult decisions ahead. For Israel, that can be best achieved once disengagement is seen as a boon to Israeli security. For Palestinians, that can be best achieved once a new government--reasonably representative, reasonably transparent, reasonably well-functioning--is up and running.

For Washington, the great irony is that ensuring the success of the incrementalist path will require a much higher level of activism than during the president's first term. It is just a different kind of activism than we have seen before. It could include the following:

The appointment not of a Middle East peace envoy but rather a presidential representative for Palestinian reconstruction and development. This should be someone who could marshal the energies of key Western and Arab countries, U.N. agencies, international financial institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and multinational corporations to help make Gaza a functioning economic entity.

A doubling of the U.S. commitment to Palestinian refugees by helping to fund the creation of a modern construction and property-rights system in exchange for closing down the Gaza operations of the U.N. Relief and Works Agency, which has acceded to a miserable Palestinian housing policy for decades.

Aid to boost the Palestinian economy, by offering tax incentives for U.S. companies to open operations in Gaza and hire local workers and by injecting new funds into educational opportunities for young Palestinians, including providing U.S. aid to build and operate an American-style, English-language university in Gaza, as we do in Cairo and Beirut.

Washington neither can nor should do this alone. Europe is keen to busy itself with Mideast peace activity, which the Bush administration should channel in a "Gaza first" direction. And despite windfall profits from high oil prices, Arab countries still owe hundreds of millions of dollars in unfulfilled commitments to the Palestinian Authority. The United States should condition any new U.S. funding of Gaza reconstruction on payment of these outstanding

pledges.

Focusing on Gaza is not as sexy as hosting peace summits; no one will ever win a Nobel Peace Prize for turning Gaza into a working proposition. But unless friends of peace invest in the success of Gaza disengagement--for both Israelis and Palestinians--peace will remain a chimera for a long time.

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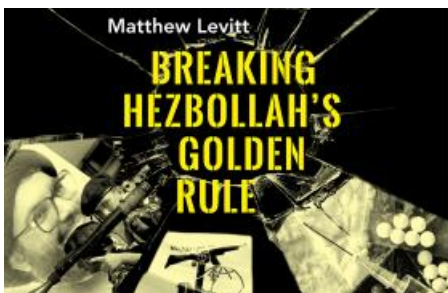
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