

# Promoting a Ceasefire on the Palestinian-Israeli Front

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

Common wisdom holds that Arafat's departure from the scene opens promising new horizons to the future of the Palestinian people as well as to Palestinian-Israeli relations. But horizons, by definition, have the tricky nature of distancing themselves from you as you approach them, leaving you with the gloom of day-to-day reality. How, then, should the parties involved go about the mission of making the promises inherent in the new situation a reality rather than a Fata Morgana? The two first steps are: empowering the emerging new-old moderate Palestinian leadership through free democratic elections and creating a significantly improved security environment, free of the devastating effects of terror. Indeed, the security and political challenges need to be addressed simultaneously since they are intertwined. This article will discuss in detail the latter challenge and will suggest a phased approach toward a stable calm.

Securing a violence-free environment (in relative, Middle Eastern terms) is essential. We have witnessed time and again how violence cripples Palestinian politics and undermines the prospects of peace between Israelis and Palestinians. A violence-heavy environment puts tremendous pressure on both Palestinian and Israeli decisionmaking, narrowing the leeway for any compromise, and forcing short-term, emotionally-driven decisions over long-term, rationally-driven ones. Holding free, fair Palestinian elections, enabling smooth Israeli disengagement from Gaza and northern West Bank, and giving a chance to Israeli-Palestinian re-engagement and future relations all require a violence-free environment.

## The Challenge and Its Prospects

The challenge is an enormous one. This is an uphill battle against anarchy reigning over the Palestinian street, against Arafat's life-long legacy of legitimizing and using terror, against the increasing involvement and impact of Iran and Hizballah in fueling Palestinian terrorism, against the desire of Hamas and other radical factions to continue the "armed struggle" so as to be able to claim that Israel was forcibly driven out of Gaza, thus legitimizing the continued use of violence, and against the overall atmosphere created by four bloody years of Palestinian intifada. The underlying question in current Palestinian public discourse is this: Was the heavy toll paid during the intifada in vain or is violence after all useful?

However, stabilizing the security environment is not a lost cause. The Palestinian public yearns for a change and both the impending Palestinian elections and Israeli disengagement from Gaza and northern West Bank could be

turned into stabilizing, rather than destabilizing, factors, if played prudently and correctly. Almost no Palestinian faction wants to be perceived as undermining national unity and the democratic process so widely upheld by the Palestinian public. The disengagement could embody a significant and tangible asset handed over from Israel to the new Palestinian leadership.

It is important to avoid the mistakes of numerous failed past security plans and ceasefires. The last such noteworthy experience, was the hudna (temporary ceasefire) struck in the summer of 2003 by Mahmoud Abbas (a.k.a. Abu-Mazen)—then prime minister and now head of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and leading candidate for Palestinian Authority (PA) chairmanship—which ultimately went up in flames after a Hamas bus suicide bombing in Jerusalem in August 2003. Now as then, approaching a ceasefire raises all sorts of difficult practical questions. How does one secure a ceasefire when two of the major parties to it—the terror factions and Israel—do not have common grounds to talk to each other? Can one include all factions in the ceasefire? How does one enforce it? How does one deprive the destabilizing forces, specifically the internal and external Islamist forces, of the power to determine the success or failure of a ceasefire? How is a ceasefire to be monitored?

### Calibrating Expectations

There is a wide gap to be bridged between Israeli and Palestinian perceptions of a ceasefire. In Israeli eyes, a ceasefire should be no more than a relatively short corridor leading the PA towards fighting terrorism and dismantling the terror infrastructure. Combating terror is perceived as both a practical necessity and an essential litmus test as regards the prospects of future peace. For its part the new Palestinian leadership will probably not disclaim the need to fight terrorism but will argue that they are not strong and popular enough to undertake a comprehensive battle against terror so soon after assuming power, and therefore require a long runway, with proven and projected success to show for it, before taking off into these stormy skies. In reality, the PA does have enough armed elements and related capabilities to successfully confront the terror groups, certainly in Gaza where the terror infrastructure is most developed and active, but does not master enough popular support, and hence political will, for a move such as this, which contradicts Arafat's legacy.

### A Practical Phased Security Plan

Due to the above considerations, it is advisable to design a process that, while preserving and stressing the end of dismantling terror infrastructure, develops and advances gradually towards that end along the milestones of elections, disengagement, and the Quartet's road map. The PA should set to work without delay, so as not to be perceived from the outset as hesitant and so as not to allow the security vacuum to be filled by negative forces.

First, the PA should serve in an active, external role as the central axis of ceasefire agreements to be brokered with the terror groups on the one hand and Israel on the other. Unlike the 2003 ceasefire, the two ceasefire agreements should be compatible with each other so that all parties read the same into all their terms. Most specifically, it should be clear that the ceasefire covers terrorist activities emanating from all of the territories (not only those handed over to Palestinian security responsibility) and aiming at anywhere in Israel or the territories. Unlike 2003, it should also not be straitjacketed into a specific, short time frame.

The new Palestinian leadership should embark, as soon as possible, on a deep reform process within the multiple security bodies (now, in the post-Arafat era, subordinate to the prime minister), which are plagued with inefficiency and corruption. It should also find a way to engage the young-guard Fatah activists (of the so-called "al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades"), many of whom are prone to negative external influences driving them towards terror. But at the end of the day, to stand a chance to succeed in all of the above undertakings, the new leadership must be prepared to enforce the ceasefire—the old easy way of soft persuasion just won't do.

In the first phase, covering the period until the Israeli disengagement, it is recommended that the security

requirements from the PA be focused on the following necessary, achievable goals:

- Delegitimizing terror and stopping incitement to terror and violence.
- Seriously dealing with warnings about impending terrorist activities.
- Investigating terror attacks, should they occur, up to a successful resolve, and bringing those involved to justice.
- Dealing with the production and firing of rockets (Qassam and other), as these might become a major destabilizing factor once Israel leaves Gaza.
- Partaking, alongside Egypt, in the efforts to stop the smuggling of weapons from Egypt to Gaza, with the notion that success here could hasten the Israeli evacuation of the Philadelphi corridor along the Egypt-Gaza border.

On its part, Israel should give the ceasefire a chance and enough room: redeploy forces to allow smooth Palestinian elections (not necessarily to the September 2000 lines, which are problematic, security-wise, at this early stage), enter a process of transferring security responsibilities to the Palestinian side, refrain from activities in areas where responsibility is transferred (except for extreme cases of real "ticking bombs"), and generally scale down its initiated operational activities against terror infrastructure in all other Palestinian populated areas. A serious Palestinian approach on security could allow Israel to gradually relax its tight grip throughout the territories, especially the checkpoints, driven by the need and desire to confront the terrorist threat.

A comprehensive and much deeper security plan addressing the vast terror infrastructure should be deferred to a later stage, following the Israeli pull-out from Gaza and northern West Bank through September 2005. By then, the new, empowered Palestinian leadership should have gathered power to govern the whole of evacuated Gaza and will have to assert this power in combating terror in order to open the way to a renewed Israeli-Palestinian peace process. At this later stage, both sides could return to the road map, which stipulates under its first phase the Palestinian obligation to uproot terror infrastructure and sketches under its later phases the road towards peace.

#### An Active International Role

An active international role in promoting and monitoring a ceasefire is highly warranted. The international community can and should help train and reform the Palestinian security bodies (including funding with proper oversight). Egypt has an important role to play in brokering an agreement between the PA and the Palestinian factions and in preventing weaponsmuggling into Gaza. The United States should lead the international effort, help broker the Palestinian-Israeli ceasefire, and monitor its fulfillment based on its intelligence capabilities and other means. In so doing, it should encourage the development of bilateral Israeli-Palestinian security exchanges rather than revert to a trilateral (Israeli-Palestinian-U.S.) security framework. Such a trilateral framework has proven somewhat problematic in the past since it made it easier for the parties to project their problems on the third party rather than try to solve them bilaterally.

Concurrently, the international community should find a mechanism to pressure Iran to halt its active support for rejectionists out to destroy the prospects for peaceful accommodation between Israelis and Palestinians. Any dialogue with Iran (like the one currently run by the Europeans) should not neglect this important dimension.

Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog (Israel Defense Forces), formerly the top military aide to Israel's minister of defense, is currently a visiting military fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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