

# A Roadmap for Revived Palestinian Reform?

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Brief Analysis

**A**ny Israeli withdrawal from Gaza or evacuation of settlements would be a positive step. Yet, Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qurei needs to develop a plan for dealing with Gaza immediately, rather than waiting until after Israel confirms its intention to withdraw from that territory. In particular, the Palestinian Authority (PA) must tell the United States and other parties what kind of support it needs to fulfill its commitments. This Palestinian plan should be practical in nature—a small roadmap of sorts. Developing such a plan should be the Palestinians' first step.

Second, the PA faces a major challenge in attempting to prove that it is capable of establishing an independent state. The first test of this capability will be in Gaza. Palestinian leaders must deal with Gaza as a unified authority, not through separate militias. They must help implement a stable, long-term ceasefire, ensuring that no rocket attacks or other military activities are launched from Gaza. Such a ceasefire would lend support to the idea that withdrawal can improve the security situation, thus encouraging Israel to withdraw from the West Bank as well. Israelis are understandably fearful; they must be provided with a secure atmosphere if they are to take the next step. To create such an atmosphere, the PA needs the support of Egypt, the United States, the rest of the Quartet (i.e., the European Union, the UN, and Russia), and others. At the same time, however, the Palestinians must lead the way, regardless of whether the Gaza withdrawal is approved or not. By doing so, the Palestinians can become a real partner in the peace process.

Nevertheless, accepting an international presence in Gaza would be a creative step on Israel's part, given the degree to which it would help the Palestinians. The PA should not miscalculate its capacity in the security and economic spheres; it needs international support. So far, Israel has refused to accept the idea of establishing an international presence in Gaza except as a protection force for evacuating settlers. With the help of the Quartet, however, an effective international political presence could be created there. Israel should support this idea; after all, most parties would like to see stability and security emerge in the Middle East based on political agreements brokered by legitimate entities such as the Quartet and, in particular, the United States.

## Improving the Atmosphere in Palestinian Society

Palestinians need a real democracy before meaningful reforms can be made. New elections would demonstrate the Palestinians' willingness to pursue peace. When elections were last held for the Palestinian Legislative Council, 88 percent of Palestinians participated. Because those elections were held under the auspices of the Oslo Accords, the large turnout served as a sign of strong support for the peace process. After three years of bloody conflict, Palestinians and Israelis find themselves in a different atmosphere. In order to restore a measure of peace, the needs of both parties must be met. The Israelis need security, and the Palestinians need a state. Despite the recent violence in Gaza, the opportunity to fulfill those needs still exists. If quiet returns to Gaza within the next few weeks, the parties can once again work toward resuming negotiations, especially if Washington makes a strong effort to support such negotiations.

In order to create a more peaceful atmosphere, Palestinians need to see changes on the ground. Despite Israeli policies, many PA officials still believe in peace. If Israel significantly curtails its closures, curfews, and invasions, the

Palestinian government will have an easier time teaching the people to support peace, whether through the media or other means. The PA is not the only the player in the game, however. Radical groups have their own media outlets. During Abu Mazen's tenure as PA prime minister in 2003, several radical radio stations were closed, and the PA began to move in a new direction in order to reduce the language of incitement. These measures must be repeated. In particular, the Palestinian people must be taught not to concentrate solely on the occupation. To be sure, a continued focus on achieving the long-term goals of a Palestinian state and a just solution for refugees does not constitute incitement. If Israel does in fact withdraw, however, Palestinians' attitudes will need to be changed in a manner that encourages them to accept coexistence with their neighbor.

### Internal Reforms

Abu Mazen's government made a real attempt to organize the PA internally and to open new channels of understanding and negotiation with the Israelis (especially in the former prime minister's speech at the June 2003 Aqaba summit). Yet, Yasir Arafat was unable to support Abu Mazen, viewing the position of prime minister as contrary to the tradition of leadership in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Nevertheless, the reforms that Abu Mazen attempted to implement are necessary. Israel can play a major role in facilitating such reforms. Indeed, if the Israeli government agrees that reforming the PA would benefit Israel, it must behave differently. For example, by refusing to reach an agreement with Abu Mazen regarding prisoners, Ariel Sharon initiated the former's political downfall (even though Sharon later made significant concessions in a prisoner swap with Hizballah).

It should also be remembered that there is not one Fatah on the ground, but many. Some factions, such as the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, want to cooperate with Hamas. Yet, the majority of Fatah members support the PLO political program and serve as moderate voices among the Palestinian people. An alternative leadership cannot be created from nothing; it will take a long time. Nevertheless, the PA can make internal reforms that affect the leadership and encourage it to make the correct decisions. For example, such efforts eventually led Arafat to accept a prime minister. Step by step, many other changes can be implemented as well.

### Dealing with Militants

Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad can be marginalized only if the peace process is resumed and actively carried out on the ground. If the PA restarts negotiations and emphasizes the political track, all of the militant groups will return to their natural size—that is, no more than 10 percent of Palestinian society. Toward that end, Hamas and Islamic Jihad must be contained. They must first declare publicly that they will cease their military activities and behave as political parties. Abu Mazen's government tried to begin that process by implementing a hudna (ceasefire), but its efforts were undermined.

If Israel conducts a full withdrawal from Gaza, including from the border zone with Egypt, the Palestinian people would consider it an achievement for their cause. Radical groups cannot swim against the current of popular opinion. If Hamas or Islamic Jihad conducted attacks from Gaza following such a withdrawal, the Palestinian people would stand against them. They do not want Israel to return to Gaza any more than the PA does.

Although there are many factors behind the PA's security failures over the past several months, the most important has been the atmosphere created by Israeli assassination operations. It is very difficult for the PA to confront the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who gather for funerals. If Israel refrains from assassinations for as little as three or four weeks, however, these funerals would end. If such an atmosphere emerges, the PA can and must do more than it has in the past. Yet, until the PA achieves some sort of political understanding that leads to quiet in Gaza, it will not have the capacity to conduct a crackdown.

Certain parties have attempted to compare the potential withdrawal from Gaza to Israel's pullout from southern Lebanon. Whether this perception becomes reality depends on how Israel and the PA approach the Gaza withdrawal.

In particular, Israel's actions will determine who receives credit for this achievement: the PA or the fanatics. In southern Lebanon, the Israeli prisoner swap with Hizballah proved to be a major mistake for Ariel Sharon. He must learn from that experience and support the PA by launching new negotiations with Prime Minister Qurei.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Jeff Cary, a research assistant and Dr. Marcia Robbins-Wilf scholar at The Washington Institute.

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