

# Democracy and the Palestinian Authority:

## Is Good Governance Essential for Peace?

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

Feb 4, 2000

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Brief Analysis

On January 27, 2000, David Schenker, a research fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [Palestinian Democracy and Governance: An Appraisal of the Legislative Council, \(templateC04.php?CID=44\)](#) and Khalil Shikaki, of the Center for Palestine Research and Studies (CPRS) and editor of al-Siyasa al-Filastiniyya (Quarterly Journal of Palestine Policy), addressed the Institute's Special Policy Forum. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

DAVID SCHENKER

In 1996, Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and South Asian Affairs Robert Pelletreau described democracies as "the best partners for making peace and building prosperity." Nevertheless, democracy is a term seldom mentioned with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. U.S. policy toward the Palestinians and the peace process has been focused on security, but that does not necessarily have to come at the expense of democracy. In fact, a more democratic Palestinian Authority (PA) would enhance security. En route to a peace agreement with Israel, Palestinians will be required to make concessions that will be easier to achieve if a popular consensus for those concessions is built through a democratic process. Democracy will promote better governance, resulting in an improved economy and therefore a better Palestinian neighbor for Israel. Furthermore, Palestinians will be discontented without democracy, for they have a long history of democratic civil institutions, including student councils and municipal elections, as well as an extensive knowledge of and appreciation for Israeli democracy.

At its core, the PA is an authoritarian system. Within this environment, the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) more than any other institution represents Palestinian democracy. Since its election in 1996, the PLC has worked on over sixty laws and has struggled to pursue its mandated role of providing oversight to the executive authority. Some of the more effective work the PLC has done has related to oversight on budgets as well as the passage of a civil service law designed to systematize the PA governmental bureaucracy. Another important example of PLC work was its 1998 corruption report, which implicated several cabinet ministers in top level PA corruption, including the disappearance of over \$300 million from PA coffers.

The limited coverage of the PLC in the Western press focuses either on disgruntled PLC members complaining about the dictatorship of Arafat or on the legislative initiatives of the PLC which complicate the peace process. To be sure, the PLC has occasionally engaged in ill-advised activities relating to the peace process such as the "land law," which stipulates that those who sell land to Jews are subject to the death penalty, and has also taken strong stances on final status issues such as Jerusalem, refugees, and water. Most PLC activities, however, are generally unheralded and unspectacular. The everyday activities of the PLC are for the most part focused on improving the quality of governance in the PA.

Arafat's influence over the top echelons of the council has served to limit the PLC's independence. Case in point is the speaker, Abu Ala. The primary role of the speaker is to stand up for the PLC in its relations with the executive, but Abu Ala's main loyalties lie with Arafat, not the legislature; he knows Arafat could dismiss him at any time. Furthermore, Abu Ala has hopes to succeed Arafat, which gives him an interest in seeing a powerful executive relative to the PLC.

If the PLC gained more power, its members would probably act more responsibly. In fact, much of the ill-advised endeavors of the council (such the land law) concerned issues about which the PLC has neither power nor responsibility. It is easy for the PLC to criticize Arafat for his peace process concessions; this is a luxury of not having power or responsibility. If its decisions began to matter, the PLC would be compelled to take more pragmatic and less ideological positions. Also, if the PLC becomes more involved in the process, its involvement will add more legitimacy to any agreement signed by Arafat, enhancing the agreement's sustainability.

KHALIL SHIKAKI

Israel and the United States have done little to promote democracy in the PA. Prior to the 1996 PA elections, former Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin was unsure of the wisdom of promoting elections among the Palestinians. He feared that a democratic PA would not serve Israeli purposes, specifically focusing on the fight against terrorism. It appears that Rabin was wrong on both fronts. Arafat could have combated terrorism effectively with the rule of law, and democracy could have enhanced the peace process.

The Benefits of Democracy to the Peace Process In the present Palestinian--Israeli situation with one democratic party (Israel) and one non-democratic party (PA), Israel is unable to gain much access to the actual pulse of the PA. Israelis hear only the voice of Arafat, not the internal debates within Palestinian society. In order for there to be a just and fair peace, the Israelis need to know what factors Palestinians deem most important--and without democracy this is a nearly impossible task.

Furthermore, for the peace process to be a success, Israel and the United States must promote democracy, and the PA must clarify the rules by which Palestinians are governed. There must be a PA constitution or some sort of basic law, as stipulated in the Oslo agreement. Ironically, this is one part of the accords that neither Israel nor the United States has insisted be implemented. Once these basic prerequisites for democracy are finally embedded, the PLC will gain greater power and be better able to exercise its proper democratic function.

The PA is now building the architecture of the future Palestinian state. Arafat should be encouraged to turn away from the path of authoritarianism. The global community should encourage Arafat and the PA to follow the path of democracy, both for the sake of the Palestinians as a people and for the sake of the peace process.

The Correlation of Support for the Peace Process and Support for Democracy Within the Palestinian community, one of the reasons for supporting for the peace process within the mainstream nationalist camp is because of the hope the peace process will lead to a democratic Palestinian state. In the greater Arab world, poll data shows that the more educated segments of the population are less supportive of the peace process because they feel the peace process encourages authoritarianism. But if it begins to appear that the peace process actually leads to more democracy, the

support among Arab educated elites for the peace process may rise. On the other hand, if the perception of democracy in the PA declines and corruption increases, the support for the peace process may subsequently decline and the support for violence may increase.

This Special Policy Forum report was prepared by Erika Reff.



Policy #246

---

## RECOMMENDED

---

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

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

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](#)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,  
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)

## TOPICS

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

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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

