

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

AFTER GAZA: THE NEXT MOVES TOWARD PEACE

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ABSTRACT

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Since the end of World War II, the United States has made numerous diplomatic attempts to resolve the Israeli–Palestinian crisis. Each of these efforts has failed, for a myriad of reasons, to broker a successful peace agreement. Ariel Sharon’s decision to unilaterally withdraw Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip in August 2005 has provided an unprecedented window of opportunity to re-energize a stagnant, and, at times, seemingly hopeless peace process. This paper will outline the history of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and provide key initiatives required to give the dream of a peaceful coexistence between the Israelis and Palestinians the potential of becoming a reality.

AFTER GAZA: THE NEXT MOVES TOWARDS PEACE

Israel and its Arab neighbors fought five major wars, and numerous smaller battles that exemplify the intractability of the conflict. The Palestinian–Israeli crises over the years have not just been about regional issues, but have, at times, brought the United States, Russia, and other significant world powers to the verge of war themselves. With a complex mosaic of religion and history as a backdrop, the fundamental nature of this conflict is easy to overlook: a modern, continuous struggle between two peoples claiming the same piece of land – historic Palestine.¹

Since the end of World War II, the United States has made numerous diplomatic attempts to resolve the Israeli–Palestinian crisis. Each of these efforts has failed, for a myriad of reasons, to broker a successful peace agreement. Ariel Sharon’s decision to unilaterally withdraw Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip in August of 2005 has provided an unprecedented window of opportunity to re-energize a stagnant, and, at times, seemingly hopeless peace process. This paper will outline the history of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and provide key initiatives required to give the dream of a peaceful coexistence between the Israelis and Palestinians the potential of becoming a reality.

If there is one overriding lesson from the story of the peace process, it is that truth-telling is a necessity, not a luxury, if both parties seriously hope to achieve a peaceful resolution. All parties must face the real facts of the past with honesty, and be willing to admit their failures, and commit to learning from their mistakes.² Third parties, such as the United States, must come to an understanding of the history of the conflict, why each group of people believes the way it does, and what is really at the heart of the conflict.

The history of the Palestinian – Israeli conflict can be traced back to some time after 2000 BC. The Jewish people believe the rights to their land are found in Genesis 12:18-21, which includes, “In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, unto thy seed have I given this land from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates.” Muslims counter that argument by stating the phrase “Abram’s Seed” was meaningless until he bore a son, Ishmael, who is traditionally linked to Arab ancestry.

The Jewish people believe that God’s covenant (the promise of the land) was intended for Abraham’s descendents through his son Isaac, which is how the Jews trace their ancestry. The Jews reference Genesis 17:21, which states, “and God said, “But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year.” Once again, the Muslims strike back, quoting Genesis 17:20, “and God said, as for Ishmael, I have heard thee.

Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly...and I will make him a great nation.”

The overarching point of this religious/historical dispute is whether God's promise applies to both of Abraham's sons, (Ishmael—born of Abraham's maidservant, Hagar, and Isaac born of Abraham's wife, Sarah), since both are “seeds of Abraham”, or is the promise exclusive to the legacy established through the lineage of Isaac? The Muslims say the promise applies to both sons, while the Jews interpret scripture to mean the covenant only applies to God's “chosen people” (i.e., them).

After a severe famine, the descendants of Isaac moved to Egypt and stayed there for over 400 years. Following a time of severe Egyptian oppression, Moses led them out of Egypt and into various parts of the Sinai Peninsula. Joshua later led the Israelites across the river Jordan around 1280 BC.³ The Jewish acquisition of land started with the capture of Jericho, and ended with the area from approximately the Mediterranean coast east to Mount Hermon, then to the southern end of the Dead Sea and west to the Mediterranean. Large areas remained under control of the Canaanites, whom the Palestinians claim are a part of their bloodline.⁴

The Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and the surrounding territories in 597 BC. The Jews and Palestinians were, from this point in history forward, under the control of one foreign power after another.⁵ The Roman destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70 signaled the forced dispersal of the Jewish people from Palestine, which resulted in the Jewish population being scattered throughout various parts of the region.⁶

For nearly two thousand years, Jews retained their identity and hope for an independent state, when at the end of their Passover celebration, they would conclude with the phrase, “next year in Jerusalem.” The prophetic understanding that God would again re-unite His people into their promised land influenced the beliefs over the centuries of many Jews and Christians.⁷ The Arabs, however, did not believe the Jews had an exclusive right to an independent state of their own, since the land in question was now part of the Arab-Islamic world.

For approximately four centuries (1516-1922), the Ottoman Empire controlled Palestine. With the Ottoman defeat in World War I, the British and French split Arab territories into spheres of influence; Palestine was designated under British authority. As a result, Great Britain, influenced significantly by a strong Zionist lobby, issued the Balfour Declaration on November 2, 1917, which clearly established the Jews as the point of reference for Western Powers and described the Muslim and Christian Palestinian citizens as “existing, non-Jewish communities.”⁸ On July 24, 1922, the League of Nations added its stamp of approval to the Balfour Declaration,

including verbiage which viewed “with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”⁹

The Balfour Declaration, coupled with increased Zionist immigration, acted as a catalyst for the emergence of political Islam in Palestine. The growth was in response to the growing conflict between Palestinian interests and Zionist encroachment meant it was absolutely essential for the Arab community to develop a strategy for survival. The results were the emergence of Palestinian-Arab nationalism, the emergence of a radical modernist Islamic movement championed by Sheik Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, and a marriage of convenience between the forces of institutional Islam and the emerging nationalism of the region’s traditional notable families.¹⁰

The Second World War brought a wave of legal and illegal Jewish immigration to Palestine, and continued to increase the tension between the two communities. One of the main factors of the immigration was that during the Holocaust, Great Britain and the United States would not accept Jewish immigrants, and their sole hope was to relocate into Palestine.¹¹

In 1947, the British, unable to control Arab–Jewish hostility, announced the passing of the increasingly volatile situation over to the United Nations (UN). A Special Commission of the UN approved a partition plan for the creation of two separate states:

A Jewish State, which would include 55 percent of the land, with a population of 509,780 Arabs and 499,020 Jews.

An Arab State, which would include the remaining 45 percent of the land, with 749,101 Arabs and 9,520 Jews.

Jerusalem and the area surrounding it would become an international zone.¹²

It is noteworthy that while the Jews in Palestine accepted the partition, the Palestinian Arabs unequivocally denounced the plan, partly because the plan was constructed and voted upon without Arab input, and the land division was unfairly biased toward the Jewish settlements.¹³

When the British mandate officially ended on 14 May, 1948, the new state of Israel was declared by the Zionist movement. The United States recognized the new state fourteen minutes after it was announced. Moments later, an invasion of Arab forces from Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq was underway. The Jewish forces prevailed, and by the time of the ceasefire in January 1949, Israel had occupied seventy-seven percent of the land (i.e. one third more than it would have had if the Palestinian Arabs accepted the original UN partition plan).¹⁴

The emergence of Israel and the 1948 War produced what the Palestinians call the “Nakba,” the catastrophe. 750,000 Arabs fled Palestine because of forced evictions by Zionist troops and fear brought on by the war.¹⁵ Naturally, the Israeli interpretation is different, with far

greater emphasis put on refugees departing because they thought the Arabs would quickly defeat the Jews, and then they would return home.¹⁶ Regardless of the perspective, it was still an epic disaster for the Palestinians, who were devastated politically, economically, and socially.

Since 1949, there have been numerous violent conflicts between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The major events began in 1956 with the international crisis over the Suez Canal, followed by the Six-Day War in June 1967. This War resulted in UN Security Council Resolution 242, which is repeatedly referenced by the Palestinians during negotiating the boundaries of various peace proposals. Resolution 242 expressly states the following:

(i) Withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict;

(ii) Termination of all claims of states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force.¹⁷

This resolution brought a period of non-violence to the conflict, but ensuing hostilities soon broke any hope for a lasting peace. The October War (also known as the Yom Kippur War or Ramadan War) took place in 1973 and was followed by Israel's invasions of Lebanon in 1978 and 1982. A lower intensity, but extended conflict of terrorism and smaller military skirmishes called the "Intifada" (uprising) lasted from 1987 to 1993. Palestinians would say the root causes of this conflict were Israel's repressive measures and human rights violations which resulted in death, imprisonment, travel restrictions, demolition of houses, curfews, school closings, unjust taxes and economic hardships.¹⁸ Some experts say it set the stage for the peace negotiations that began with the Madrid Conference in 1991.¹⁹

The United States has failed time after time in brokering a successful peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. The two most recent attempts were the Oslo Accords, sealed with a handshake on the White House lawn in 1993 between Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and President Bill Clinton's 2000 Camp David Summit between Arafat and new Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

The Oslo Accords, negotiated in a cloak of secrecy, included mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO, the creation of a limited Palestinian Government, an end to the Intifada, and a PLO commitment to end terrorism and violence. There is substantial disagreement over why the Accords failed, but many experts agree one of the primary reasons the Oslo Accords never produced peace was due to poor leadership, including Arafat's inability to control terrorist activities, the doubling of the Israeli settlement population to 200,000, and the addition of new

settlements.²⁰ Former Ambassador Dennis Ross, US Envoy to the Middle East (1988-2000) states, “Oslo might not have failed if Arafat had been prepared to be a leader and not just a symbol. As a symbol, he could not give up Palestinian myths. As a symbol, he could not compromise or concede in order to end the conflict.”²¹

With Yasser Arafat feeling pressure from Palestinians due to the failed Oslo Accords, and the May 1999 elections ushering in new Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who was hoping to establish an unprecedented breakthrough in a peace settlement, President Clinton arranged the Camp David Summit. Barak submitted a proposal which included an Israeli withdrawal from over ninety percent of the West Bank and almost the entire Gaza Strip, the destruction of numerous settlements, and a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem. But Arafat – over the objections of some of his closest advisors – dismissed the offer, saying it gave the Palestinians too little on Jerusalem’s holy places and did nothing to return land to the 1948 refugees, whom he felt should have the right to return to the homes under UNSC Resolution 242, since they vacated their property during Israel’s War of Independence.²²

Consequently, President Clinton blamed Arafat for the breakdown in the talks and Arafat returned home as a hard-line hero. In September of 2000, a new Palestinian uprising known as the “Second Intifada”, erupted into another wave of violence and terrorism. The fire was rekindled after Israel’s right wing Likud party leader, Ariel Sharon walked up to the al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam. This visit sparked an altercation between the Palestinians defending the mosque and security forces guarding Sharon. The Intifada quickly spread over the next few days across Palestine and into Israel.

On April 30, 2003, the U.S. Department of State released a Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, which is widely known as simply “The Roadmap to Peace.” The Roadmap, which was negotiated and supported by the “Quartet”, (United States, United Nations, European Union, and Russia), is President George Bush’s attempt to obtain the “holy grail” of peace agreements: a final solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

President Bush commented on the overarching objectives of the Roadmap when he stated, “We believe that all people in the Middle East – Arab and Israeli alike – deserve to live in dignity, under free and honest governments. We believe people who live in freedom are more likely to reject bitterness, blind hatred, and terror, and are far more likely to turn their energy toward reconciliation, reform and development.”²³ The Roadmap, which made clear both sides must take tangible steps toward a two-state vision, was broken into three phases and contains

specific dates of accomplishment, which were to be evaluated on a regular basis by the Quartet.

The three phases, in general terms, are as follows:

PHASE I (May 2003): Ending terror and violence, normalizing Palestinian life, and building Palestinian Institutions.

PHASE II (Dec 2003): Transition to independent Palestinian State with provisional borders and attributes of sovereignty.

PHASE III (2005): Permanent status agreement and end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to include consolidation of reform and stabilization of Palestinian Institutions, and sustained, effective Palestinian security performance.²⁴

The Roadmap to Peace, which provided a faint glimmer of hope for peace, quickly became viewed as the Roadmap to Nowhere. The unparalleled opportunities for peace President Bush confidently predicted following the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq failed to materialize and degenerated into mostly lip service of good intentions. Three weeks after the Roadmap was formally published, over 50 Palestinians and a dozen Israelis had been killed.

The Roadmap failed primarily because (like its predecessors of Oslo, Camp David, etc...) of a lack of leadership on all sides. The Roadmap was not crafted by either the Palestinians or the Israelis, so the United States needed President Bush to get more directly involved in brokering a deal, but he elected to stay on the sidelines. Additionally, the Palestinian leadership could not establish enough political leverage to end the terrorism and violence, and Israel's intense security tactics against the Palestinians, coupled with demonstrating no interest to engage in possible solutions while the bloodshed continued, doomed the plan from the outset.²⁵

After yet another year of violence, and recognizing the prospects for negotiations with the Palestinians would not occur in the near future, Prime Minister Sharon's Disengagement Plan of April 2004 was supported via a letter signed by President Bush and was approved by the Knesset on October 25, 2004. As Sharon noted, "The Disengagement Plan does not prevent the implementation of the Roadmap. Rather, it is a step Israel will take in the absence of any other option, in order to improve its security."²⁶ The main points of the Disengagement Plan are:

- Israel withdraws from Gaza and four settlements in the northern West Bank.
- The settlements remain for the Palestinians if accepted by an appropriate agency.
- The borders are not final. Final borders will be negotiated with the Palestinians when they have fulfilled the conditions of the Roadmap for Peace (controlling terror).

The main points of President Bush's letter:

- The US supports the Israeli Disengagement Plan
- The Roadmap remains the only plan for peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

- The US believes that the Palestinian refugee problem must be solved by settling the refugees in the territory of the Palestinian state
- The US recognizes the need for the controversial Israeli security fence, which is a temporary measure and not a border.²⁷

On 11 November, 2004, Yasser Arafat, who was PLO leader for 35 years, and was the founder of the Fatah party in 1958, died from multiple organ failure at the age of 75. Various media outlets reported that people wept openly in the Palestinian territories, where the government declared 40 days of mourning.²⁸ However, consider the irony that only 42 percent of Palestinians say they were optimistic about the future before Arafat became ill, and 60 percent said they were optimistic after his death.²⁹ The Palestinians did retain their respect for Arafat's contribution of bringing the Palestinian issue onto the world's stage, but it is obvious the Palestinian people also recognized that Arafat was an impediment to progress rather than a leader who could find peace in the midst of the storm. Two months later, Mahmoud Abbas would be elected as president of the Palestinian Authority, and the Palestinian people, starved for a glimmer of hope, would witness an amazing event later in the summer of 2005.

Images shown throughout the world on August 15, 2005 bordered on the surreal. The coverage was emotional, breathtaking, historic, and amazingly enough, it was peaceful. The unimaginable event was the beginning of the evacuation of Jewish citizens from the Gaza Strip and Northern West Bank, which culminated a 38-year Israeli occupation of the region. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's radical move of disengagement represents a significant opportunity to get back to the fundamental bargaining issues of security for the Israelis and a free and independent Palestinian state.

Although the Iraq war has taken center stage on the world's media outlets, resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is absolutely essential to winning the global war on terrorism and advancing US national security interests. The United States National Security Strategy states that "the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is critical because of the toll of human suffering, because of America's close relationship with Israel and key Arab States, and because of that region's importance to other global priorities of the United States. There can be no peace for either side without freedom for both sides. America stands committed to an independent and democratic Palestine, living beside Israel in peace and security."³⁰

Sharon's successful withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and selected West Bank settlements, coupled with the death of Yassar Arafat in November 2004 and the subsequent election of President Mahmoud Abbas in January 2005, who ran on a platform to eliminate violence, have

created an unprecedented opportunity to build the synergy and tangible results required to bring the idea of peace back into the realm of the possible. This improbable trifecta of events must be capitalized upon by the United States to give the process the required leadership needed to succeed.

In November 2005, Ariel Sharon announced another disengagement. This was not about the Israelis giving up more land, but it was about Sharon resigning from his own right-wing political party, Likud, due to the dissent over the Gaza pullout and the formation of a Sharon-led coalition between the Likud and Labour parties. As Sharon compromised politically by aligning with Labour and other factions in the Knesset, politicians in the right-wing spectrum of the Likud leadership began to take strong action by opposing a number of his policies and handing him defeats in Knesset votes, thus reducing his ability to effectively lead the nation of Israel.³¹

Prime Minister Sharon quickly formed a new political party called "Kadima," which means "forward" or "onward." The main points of Kadima's national agenda were released on November 28, 2005 as presented by Justice Minister Tzipi Livni in a drafted statement:

The Israeli nation has a national and historic right to the land of Israel. However, in order to maintain a Jewish majority, part of the Land of Israel must be given up to maintain a Jewish democratic state.

Israel shall remain a Jewish state and homeland. Jewish majority in Israel will be preserved by territorial concessions to Palestinians.

Jerusalem and large settlements in the West Bank will be kept under Israeli control.

The Israeli national agenda to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and achieve two states for two nations will be the road map. It will be carried out in stages: dismantling terror organizations, collecting firearms, implementing security reforms in the Palestinian Authority and preventing incitement. At the end of the process, a demilitarized Palestinian state devoid of terror will be established.³²

On December 18, only a month after Sharon secured the agreement for new elections to be held on 28 March 2006, Israel and the upstart Kadima party received word that Ariel Sharon had suffered a minor stroke. He subsequently suffered a massive stroke on January 5, 2006, and as of the writing of this document, he remains in a coma. These unexpected series of tragic events ushered in an aura of uncertainty concerning the political viability of the Kadima party, which selected Ehud Olmert as the acting chairman. Olmert is committed to carrying out the policies established by Ariel Sharon and although a Smith Institute poll conducted on 24 February found that only 46% of the Israeli's consider Olmert "suitable" to be Prime Minister, he leads in the polls and is favored to win the March election.³³

In another strange twist of events, the Islamic Resistance Movement, more widely known as Hamas, was victorious in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections held on January 25, 2006. After forty years of total Palestinian political domination, Fatah, the party of Yasser Arafat and current President Mahmoud Abbas, has been replaced by Hamas, a radical Islamist organization that has only existed since 1987.³⁴ The appeal of Hamas stems from a total lack of public confidence in the capability of the Palestinian Authority to provide for the basic needs of its people. Inside the Occupied Territories, despite the hard-line rhetoric of its official Charter (which calls for the elimination of Israel), Hamas is viewed much more through the prism of non-corruption and social welfare, than by its radical ideology of militancy against Israel.³⁵

The Bush administration understands if the United States is able broker significant strides towards peace in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it would have a major impact on changing the negative perception of America that has formed in the Middle East. When the United States backed away from a leadership role in peacemaking, the Arab countries saw disengagement from something they considered one of their most critical issues, thus the view from the Gulf region was that the United States was indifferent to the ongoing grievances of the Palestinians. The United States must work diligently to develop a positive image in the Middle East, which is becoming increasingly difficult due to slow progress being made in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Becoming visible and proactive in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is a key ingredient to establishing a positive perception in the region. The following are five actions the Bush Administration should implement before the summer of 2006 to build upon the success of the Gaza pullout and enhance the possibility of a successful final Israeli-Palestinian peace solution.

1. Ensure violence and terrorism is eliminated on both sides. The United States should proactively work to make the world understand that there is a real war underway between a minority of the Palestinians and the Israelis, and the goal of each minority is to eliminate the other. Consequently, it becomes next to impossible to engage in any type of diplomatic efforts when death and destruction dominate the region.³⁶ President Abbas must create this environment by denouncing, disarming, and eliminating the extremists of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other radical Islamic militias currently engaging in terrorist activities against Israel, and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert must guarantee Washington that the “pre-emptive” strikes will be only be used in the utmost extreme circumstance, and only with the concurrence of the United States. Abbas, after meeting in Cairo on 01 February 2006 with Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, made strong statements towards Hamas, when he commented that Hamas must stop the violence and recognize Israel.³⁷

Rocket attacks should be the focus of cease fire discussions. Qassam rockets are the most significant threat to Israel from Gaza, and without robust security arrangements, rockets fired from northern Gaza could conceivably hit the Ashkelon oil refinery and other strategic Israeli assets.³⁸ Recently, homemade Qassam rockets being fired from northern Gaza have been striking into Israel, and Israel is responding with volleys of heavy artillery fire. In 2005, 40 Qassam rocket attacks were launched against Israel from the Gaza Strip, this year; already 96 rockets have struck targets inside Israel.³⁹

2. Recognition of Hamas. The victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections has driven the United States, European Union and most of the world into a perplexing dilemma. The Palestinians have chosen Hamas in an election that was probably the most democratic in the entire Arab world, including Iraq.⁴⁰ Therefore, the democratic choice should be accepted, especially since spreading democracy in the Middle East is one of the primary strategic goals of the Bush administration. Consequently, the Hamas victory should compel the US Department of State to re-evaluate its current approach to promoting democracy in the Middle East.⁴¹ Washington needs to take a deeper look into antidemocratic or radical parties leveraging democratic forms and mechanisms to seize power, especially in environments that are corrupt and where hard line Islamists are the only organized alternative to the status quo.⁴²

The problem with the outcome of the elections is that Hamas is listed as a terrorist organization by both the United States and the European Union. Hamas, meaning “zeal” in Arabic, is the acronym of the al-Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiya – the Islamic Resistance Movement. The group was established by the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1987 during the first Intifada.⁴³ Hamas has a military wing that engages in terrorist acts, and a civilian wing that focuses on social programs such as education, and health care. The radical ideology of Hamas is captured in their charter. The following list a few excerpts from the charter:

Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it.

The Islamic Resistance Movement believes that the land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf consecrated for future Moslem generations until Judgment Day. It, or any part of it, should not be squandered: it...should not be given up

There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad. Initiatives, proposals, and international conferences are all a waste of time and vain endeavors.⁴⁴

Hamas won 74 out of the 132 available Palestinian legislative seats, but the victory was more a protest against the corrupt Fatah-led government and the miserable life conditions of the

Palestinian people, than a vote for Hamas.⁴⁵ Regardless of the motivation, Hamas has scored a majority role in the emerging Palestinian political system and it is absolutely essential that the United States integrate Hamas into mainstream Palestinian politics while preventing it from continuing its militant nature. Peace will only be possible if Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the other militant Palestinian factions have a voice in the new democratic system. Otherwise, if they are locked out of the process, they will feel disenfranchised and continue the terrorist attacks on Israel in order to advance their own political agendas.⁴⁶

The United States should consider supporting, either directly or indirectly, a national unity government between Hamas and Fatah, who respectively received 44% and 41% of the total Palestinian vote. President Abbas needs to have Fatah in the cabinet as a partner to Hamas, because he does not have the operational capability to implement his peace process, foreign policy issues, and security strategy.⁴⁷ Khalil Shikaki, Director of Projects, Center for Palestinian Research and Studies, believes in a unity government because, “[That way] it would have continued control over portfolios needed for the president to be able to negotiate with Israel and the international community, and be able to implement commitments he would be making in these negotiations. I think this is where the crux of the matter is.”⁴⁸

Pressure is growing on Fatah and Hamas to join forces in a national unity government since European governments want to find some solution to continue to provide financial and humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian Authority. This government would undoubtedly drive Hamas into the social ministries so it can leverage its influence on the population’s welfare and affections by improving their quality of life, while leaving the foreign relations largely in the hands of Fatah, with whom the international community has already built a comfort level through past negotiations. But Hamas must not be allowed to place the blame on Fatah if things do not improve in Palestine. Tamara Cofman Wittes of the Brookings Institute states that “Hamas must not be given the option of avoiding the responsibility of a democratic victor to carry out “the people’s business.” Its ideas and capabilities must be put to the test, and then the public can evaluate its performance.”⁴⁹

The United States needs to recognize, even in the early stages, that Hamas is showing small signs of cooperation and willingness to negotiate with Israel. In a 29 January al-Jazeera press conference, Khaled Mashal, the Damascus based chief of Hamas’s political bureau, announced Hamas is willing to negotiate a long-term truce, or Hudna, with Israel in return for a complete Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines.⁵⁰ Mashal even hinted of opportunities to negotiate with Israel even if they did not agree to Hamas’s demands, when he stated, “when

Israel produces a genuine offer, we will look into it, but right now, there is nothing on the table to discuss.”⁵¹

The leadership of Hamas has, over the years, began to clarify that its aggression is not against Israel, but rather against “Zionists.” Although this is still a significant problem, this does illustrate Hamas is willing to change its original message and extremist rhetoric. The following text outlines Hamas’s view of distinction between Judaism and Zionism:

The non-Zionist Jew is one who belongs to the Jewish faith, whether as a believer or due to accident of birth, but does not relate to the above ideas and takes no part in aggressive actions against our land and our umma. The Zionist, is one who embraces the aggressive Jewish ideology and becomes an instrument for the realization of those ideas on our land and against our umma. On this basis, Hamas will not adopt a hostile position in practice against anyone because of his ideas or his creed, but will adopt such a position if those ideas and creed are translated into hostile or damaging actions against our umma and our nation.⁵²

Hamas’s leadership recognizes that, while they did better than expected in the elections, it was really the more moderate middle, who still wants to continue negotiations toward a two-state solution that put it into power. These voters are not committed long-term to Hamas, and they are expecting them to deliver on all fronts. In order to succeed, Hamas needs the United States to play a diplomatic and economic role in the Palestinian future. The Bush Administration does not need to turn its back on a democratically elected party. It is time for the United States to be patient and willing to watch and assist in the transformation of a terrorist group into a legitimate political organization.

3. Support sound economic policies for a post withdrawal Gaza. The Gaza economy suffered tremendous damage as a result of the Second Intifada which began in 2000. Gaza’s commercial and trade links with the West Bank were significantly severed and the transportation pipeline was reduced to a virtual standstill. The results are telling: 50% unemployment, 65% live under the poverty line (\$2.10 per day for a family of six), and the real per capita income dropped by 30%, down to \$934 per year.⁵³ The United States should coordinate with the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and US Overseas Private Investment Corporation to develop a plan with President Abbas that has realistic milestones and solid accountability trails.

The State Department should evaluate the possibility of applying public pressure to obtain money pledged by donor nations to the Palestinians at the conclusion of the 2002 Arab Summit and at the December 2004 Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) meeting in Oslo. Arab countries that agreed to financially support the Palestinians fell short by \$46 million per month or \$552

million in 2004. Citing internal data from the IMF and the Palestinian Authority (PA), US officials estimated the Arab League states owe the PA \$891.8 million.⁵⁴ The financial support is needed to create jobs, and Israel needs to be pressured by the United States and European Union into relaxing the trade restrictions to create a more vibrant economic environment.

The rapid economic recovery is essential for success and will give credibility to President Abbas and the Fatah party, while at the same time, eliminates a strong power base for Hamas. PA Chief of Staff Rafiq Al-Husseini explained this at the Saban Center for Middle East policy when he said, "If you create the jobs, if people see that there is money in their pockets that they can feed their families, then people will become more hopeful...and therefore the statements of despair given by the older groups that are working to continue the resistance against Israel will go away from their hearts."⁵⁵

After the January 2006 elections that ushered Hamas into power, the United States immediately went on the offensive and said it may cut off most of the approximately \$350 million in aid provided to the Palestinians. "You cannot have one foot in the camp of terror and the other foot in the camp of politics," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told the press in Cairo, "You have to renounce violence."⁵⁶ Secretary Rice was visiting Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates in an effort to convince those nations to hold back funding from Palestine until Hamas formally recognizes Israel and ends terrorist acts.

Of course, the European Union and the Israelis jumped on board, with Israel vowing to withhold \$55 million a month in taxes owed to the Palestinians.⁵⁷ Dov Weisglass, an adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, stated, "The idea is to put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger."⁵⁸ Israel is potentially becoming the lightning rod Hamas uses to galvanize public support in the West Bank and Gaza against a putative campaign by Israel to bring the Palestinian Authority to its knees.⁵⁹

Both the United States and Israel were encouraged by the Quartet's decision that all Palestinian Authority funding "would be reviewed by donors against [the] government's commitment to the principles of nonviolence, recognition of Israel and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations including the road map [to peace]."⁶⁰

At a time when the United States could demonstrate real significant leadership in the revitalizing the peace process, it has decided to play hardball and miss a golden opportunity to gain favor with the Muslim world. Already, Hamas's leaders have said they will not compromise their core principles, even if it means a cutoff of international aid to the Palestinian Authority. Khaled Mashal stated, "Hamas will manage and the Arab countries and Muslims won't let the

Palestinians down. Hamas will not trade its political program for money from the international community.”⁶¹

Iran has pledged support of Hamas in lieu of assistance from other governments, and the US is allowing terrorist organizations an opportunity for stronger ties with Hamas and the Palestinian people. Speaking in an Interview on CNN, former President Jimmy Carter felt it was counterproductive to withhold funds. He said, “My concern is that in order to try...to punish Hamas, we are actually going to be punishing the Palestinian people who are already living in deprivation. And it's going to turn the Palestinian people even more against the West and against Israel and against us. And make Hamas seem to be...their only friend.”⁶²

4. Impose Limitations on Israel. The Bush administration should explore the possibility of drafting a public mandate that the security fence currently being built limit hardships on Palestinians and not increase the Israeli territory. The US government should be the champion of the Palestinian people's rights to have an appropriate amount of land for farming and living, as well as communications and travel between their areas. It is paramount to the United States credibility in the entire Middle East that America publicly insists on an absolute end to Israeli expansionism. This can be achieved through formal statements and the threat of reduced financial and military support, since this action will display a humanitarian desire to protect the weaker party from the stronger power. Much trust can be recovered when the world recognizes that United States total support for Israeli security is not overshadowed by a one-sided support for extreme Israeli territorial goals.⁶³

5. Reactivate the Roadmap. The United States should aggressively work to reactivate the Roadmap even though Khaled Mashal denounced the Roadmap as “Sharon's map”, and stated Hamas will never accept it.⁶⁴ The Roadmap is the only peace document that has the support of many Israelis and Palestinians, the United States, and the United Nations. One of the most unique aspects of the initiative is the acknowledgement of the broken trust between Israelis and Palestinians. It also contains explicit language emphasizing that conflict resolution will be achieved through a series of gradual steps which require mutual performance, similar to the Oslo Accords. An international conference, led by the United States and the Quartet, should re-evaluate the Roadmap and establish new dates of completion. One of the problems with the Roadmap, since it was not crafted by either the Palestinians or the Israelis, is there are differences when interpreting certain aspects of the document. All of those specific areas need to be identified and a firm understanding of all terms and conditions agreed upon. In the case of a stalemate, the Quartet will make the final decision, which will be binding upon both parties.

There is growing concern from the Palestinians that the Gaza unilateral pullout was Israel's way of sending a strong message that they will hold on to the other West Bank territories. Palestinian National Authority spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeineh told reporters in Gaza that the world must urge Israel to implement the Roadmap and considered Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's linking between making progress in the peace process and Palestinian capability to secure the Gaza strip as "not encouraging." Abu Rudeineh went on to say, "Such linkages would never push forward the peace process. On the contrary, it dismantles the implementation of the Roadmap that is backed by the international community."⁶⁵

Israel is just demanding the Palestinians honor their part of the Roadmap, however, when it comes to counter terrorism issues. Prime Minister Sharon told Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Jordan's King Abdullah II, and Palestinian Chairman Abbas of his determination to carry out the Disengagement Plan: "The Disengagement Plan can pave the way to the implementation of the Roadmap, to which we are committed and which we want to implement. We are prepared to actively fulfill all our obligations, and expect the other side to carry out all its obligations. Only actions and not words – this is the only way to attain the vision of the two states living side-by-side in peace and tranquility."⁶⁶

Summary

As of this publication date, a great deal has changed in the Israeli-Palestinian landscape. Ariel Sharon is out of the Israeli political picture and Ehud Olmert has been named his successor. Mr. Olmert has made clear he wants Israeli settlers to leave most of the West Bank, he has stated some Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem would not be part of Israel, and he wants Israel to have permanent borders by 2010.⁶⁷ Hamas has defeated the Fatah party in the January Palestinian elections and will control a majority in the Palestinian parliament and its government.

Since April 2003, the Roadmap was a major American agenda item in the Middle East, but the United States has not stayed actively engaged, resulting in a perception among Arab states that the Bush Administration does not care about one of the Middle East's most emotional and pressing issues. Since the Gaza pullout has occurred, there is an unprecedented window of opportunity for the United States to make a monumental impact on re-establishing positive relations in the Arab world and furthering American National Security policies in the region.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's all-night negotiation efforts to convince Israel to put the Gaza-Egyptian border under the supervision of European monitors will undoubtedly

allow freer movement for Palestinians – a significant step toward an eventual peace deal between the historic enemies. The Bush administration seems focused on turning the Gaza disengagement into a springboard for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, but this strategy is suffering from the weakness of the Palestinian Authority and the lack of trust from the Israelis, whose interest is focused on looking out for their security first. Getting both parties to the negotiating table has now grown more challenging since the January elections have brought Hamas into the Palestinian political mainstream with its terrorist abilities intact.

As this paper has illustrated, the history, religions, cultures, leaders, people, and issues are extremely complex, weaving a web of mistrust and pessimism for any type of real peace to finally come to fruition. Consequently, the chances of implementing even one of the five critical initiatives outlined above are, at best, a long shot. But that does not mean we should abandon our efforts to take positive, proactive steps that could eventually lead to a true giant leap for mankind.

Whether we want to admit it or not, the United States remains a key player in the high-stakes Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Bush administration should work to ensure violence and terror are eliminated, recognize Hamas and support a unified Palestinian government, support sound economic policies, impose limitations on Israel, and reactivate the Roadmap to enable these bitter enemies to finally give peace (shalom and salaam) a chance of succeeding.

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