



Passing the BATON

*Foreign Policy Challenges and
Opportunities Facing the New Administration*

Morning Panel 2: “Reinvigorating Prospects for Arab-Israeli Peacemaking”

Speakers: **Daniel Kurtzer**, former U.S. ambassador to Egypt and Israel;
Ziad Asali, President, American Task Force on Palestine;
David Makovsky, Director, Project on the Middle East Peace Process, The Washington Institute;
Samuel Lewis, Former U.S. ambassador to Israel, Former president, United States Institute of Peace

Main Issues

On January 20, President-elect Barack Obama will take office and face the challenge of a stagnating Arab-Israeli peace process. Invigorating the stalled peacemaking process is made more urgent by the worsening crisis in Gaza, where the large-scale Israeli military campaign has so far failed to stop Hamas rocket attacks and has led to a massive civilian and humanitarian crisis for Gaza’s 1.5 million residents.

Recent events notwithstanding, however, resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict remains vital to American national interests. If the Gaza crisis can be resolved, and a durable cease-fire is reached, the Obama administration may be able to take steps to transcend the current administration’s modest goal of conflict management and reengage in full-scale peacemaking efforts between Arabs and Israelis.

One of Israel’s principal objectives, said David Makovsky, is to stop the smuggling of rockets and arms from Egypt into Gaza. Makovsky said the Egyptian position on the “Philadelphi” corridor—the area on the Gaza side of the Egypt-Gaza border--could have a major effect on the Israeli elections. He also suggested that if the smuggling does not stop, Israel may expand its ground campaign into the area, including the town of Rafah.

Ziad Asali addressed internal Palestinian political dynamics, saying the current crisis is adding further strains to an already dire situation of ideological and geographical division in Palestine. The terms of a potential ceasefire may dramatically affect the current Fatah-Hamas political standoff. For example, if a ceasefire appears to give concessions to Hamas, the Palestinian public may view the Hamas position as paying off, which would undoubtedly have a negative effect on future prospects for peacemaking.

According to Daniel Kurtzer, Hamas and Israel seemed to have shared at least one common position: they both viewed the pre-war status quo as unacceptable. The two parties otherwise have interests that appear to be completely contradictory. Hamas has tried to legitimize itself as a



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government for all Palestinians while maintaining its credentials as a resistance movement. Israel has been looking for ways to prevent Hamas' legitimization.

Finding common ground to achieve a ceasefire will no doubt prove exceedingly difficult. If some mutuality of interests between Arabs and Israelis can be identified, the new U.S. administration could use this as the basis to renew the peace process. While Palestinians are divided regarding a peace settlement, there is always the option of pursuing an agreement and then subjecting it to a Palestinian referendum.

Kurtzer said Palestinians and Israelis both perceive the human costs as unacceptable. Asali emphasized that behind the media images of this conflict lie real and widespread suffering and that more attention is needed to prevent the current crisis from spiraling out of control. Asali added that the graphic images coming out of Gaza could help convince the Israeli people that it is in their interest to achieve a two-state solution—and that an Israeli Prime Minister who would freeze settlements should be rewarded.

On the question of Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations, Makovsky argued that both Syria and Israel see negotiations as in their interest. If they did not, they would not have resumed talks in 2008. In Israel, the greatest advocates for renewing the Syria track are members of the national security elite – the upper military echelons who believe that peace with Syria could lead to a strategic reordering that would help contain Iran and undermine Hezbollah and Hamas. Peace could represent a fresh start for Syria, since the regime has been increasingly isolated regionally as the Arab world becomes increasingly uneasy about the country's close ties with Iran.

Policy Conclusions*

1. The panelists agreed that the demonization and denigration that occur in the media on both sides of the conflict are toxic and must come to an end. Makovsky argued that the trend toward demonization is much stronger in the Arab media than in the Israeli media.
2. The panelists agreed that for progress to be made, the new U.S. administration must develop a comprehensive approach for resolving the conflict rather than merely trying to manage it.

* Policy Conclusions from Group Panel Discussions at Passing the Baton 2009 were not necessarily achieved by group consensus. In some instances, individual panel members may have been in disagreement with the larger group. For specific information on each panel's contents, please see the comprehensive online archive at www.usip.org/baton2009.