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The Israel Lobby and the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process

Miles Hansen

Abstract

This paper uses foreign policy analysis theory to study the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the period following Mahmoud Abbas' election until Hamas' surprising victory in the January 2006 parliamentary elections. It integrates a narrative of the year leading up to Hamas' victory with an analysis of U.S. policy toward Israel and Palestine, and the influence of the Israel Lobby—particularly AIPAC. The author argues that the Israel Lobby prevented the U.S. from supporting a moderate Palestinian Authority, thereby shifting Palestinians' support to extremists and consequently decreasing prospects for peace. The lack of support from the U.S. inhibited the PA's ability to function as an effective governing power and to provide essential public goods, e.g., political, social, economic, and security reforms. The Palestinian people, disenchanted with the weak leadership of Fatah, elected Hamas as a protest against Fatah—not as an endorsement for Hamas' terrorist tactics. The paper concludes that the possibility for outcomes constructive to the peace process would have been higher if the U.S. had lent Abbas its full support.

Introduction

The past eighteen months have been a difficult time in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a means of accomplishing its political goals, the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority has refused to accept the existence of Israel and renounce violence against Israeli civilians. Civil strife has been rampant in the Occupied Territories as Hamas and Fatah vie for political power, resulting in the effactual split of Palestine into two separate entities—one led by Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the other led by Fatah in the West Bank. Israel has continued to confiscate land unilaterally as it works to complete its Separation Barrier, dividing the Occupied Territories even further. The U.S. has continued its boycott of aid to the Palestinian Authority and Israel refuses to release millions of dollars of tax revenue collected on behalf of the Palestinian Authority (PA)
The lack of these funds has crippled the PA's ability to provide basic needs to its people, raising the level of human suffering in the Occupied Territories to new levels.

These unfortunate developments in the conflict followed a period during 2005 when, according to both Israeli and Palestinian leaders, the prospects for peace were high (Oliver 2005). This paper looks at the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as a struggle driven by missed opportunities and analyzes the period following moderate Mahmoud Abbas' election as president of the PA until Hamas' surprising victory in the January 2006 parliamentary elections. Abbas' willingness to rein in Palestinian militia groups, while actively pursuing a closer relationship with the West, in concert with the peace process was a breath of fresh air following the tumultuous years of the Al-Aqsa Intifadeh. These developments provided a new beginning of sorts in the peace process and a prime opportunity for a lasting peace to be forged between Israel and Palestine. Despite the optimistic mood of the time, as the year continued to progress, hope turned to disillusionment and compromise to belligerence as leaders neglected their commitments, failing to capitalize on the opportunity, thereby opening the door for Hamas' rise to power and allowing the prospects of peace to stagnate and disappear into history as yet another missed opportunity.

Attempting to understand what went wrong at this particular juncture will enable policymakers to adjust future policy to ensure that similar problems are not repeated. The role of the U.S. has been prominent throughout the conflict, and U.S. policy is greatly influenced by domestic pro-Israel lobbyist groups, particularly the American Israel Political Affairs Committee (AIPAC). While compiling a narrative of the year leading up to the Hamas victory, I integrated different analyses of U.S. policy towards Israel and Palestine in an effort to find the effects of U.S. policy on the shift in political power from Fatah to Hamas. To understand this relationship better, it is critical to study the influence the Israel Lobby had on U.S. policy. The evidence suggests that U.S. policy failed to keep its commitments to Abbas, undermining U.S. support of the PA while Fatah was in control, thereby inhibiting the PA's ability to function as an effective governing power. Because the PA could not provide essential public goods such as political, social, economic, and security reforms, it had politically weak leadership. As a result, the Palestinian people became disenchanted with the failures of Fatah and elected Hamas as a protest to Fatah. Therefore, Hamas' victory was not an endorsement for Hamas' terrorist tactics or its refusal to consider peace with Israel. Rather, the group won in spite of these extremist views, because it was the only other viable alternative to Fatah.

**Historical Context**

In January 2005, Israel and the PA seemed on the verge of peace. Both sides recognized the right of the other to exist, and leaders publicly proclaimed a desire to reach a peace agreement. Mahmoud Abbas successfully negotiated support from Hamas and Islamic Jihad for a cessation of hostilities with Israel. Then on 8 February, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Abbas negotiated a ceasefire between Israel and Palestine, ending a five-year Intifadeh. At a meeting in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt, Sharon declared that “Israel [would] cease all its military activity against all Palestinians everywhere” (Oliver 2005). Interestingly, President George Bush had promised Abbas $350 million of direct foreign aid just a week before to help...
support the newly elected leader in his efforts to rein in Palestinian militias and to enhance the governing capability of the PA. Bush also invited Sharon and Abbas to the White House to build upon this new foundation of peace. Sharon and Bush recognized the opportunity to reach an agreement with the pragmatic Abbas and therefore directed policy toward supporting the newly elected leader. Abbas best summarized the positive mood about the prospects for peace when, referring to Sharm el-Sheik's epithet as the city of peace, he asserted that "a new opportunity for peace [was] born today in the City of Peace . . . let's pledge to protect it" (Oliver 2005).

Recent history shows that, despite commitment from all three parties to a two-state solution and a mutual desire for peace, this was yet another lost opportunity in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict tragedy. Over the course of eleven months, the ceasefire and the peace process slowly unraveled, concluding when Hamas' electoral victory indefinitely derailed the peace effort.

As long as Hamas remains in power and refuses to recognize Israel's right to exist, Israel will refuse to negotiate. The conflict between Fatah and Hamas will cripple the PA's ability to represent all Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, let alone in the international community. How was the momentum for peace that came out of the City of Peace in February 2005 lost? What contributed to Fatah's demise and Hamas' victory in the 2006 elections? What role did U.S. policy play in this process, and how did the Israel Lobby influence U.S. policy?

Answers to these questions may be found, in part, by analyzing the role the U.S. played in the conflict and the effects of U.S. policy on political developments within the PA. Illuminating these effects (and their negative impacts on the peace process) clarifies the benefits if the U.S. assumes a balanced position between the belligerent parties in the conflict. In order to understand how this occurs, this paper analyzes the foreign policy formulation process within the U.S., particularly the strong influence of the Israel Lobby. The effects of this influence did not coincide with the stated goals of both the U.S. and Israel and, therefore, at least in this particular instance, the Israel Lobby does not further the interests of either state. In order for peace to come to Israel and Palestine, it is imperative that the policies of all stakeholders are designed to accomplish the goals Sharon and Abbas agreed upon in Sharm el-Sheik. These goals, according to numerous public opinion polls, are supported by a majority of Israelis and Palestinians as well as the current leadership of Israel, Fatah, and the U.S. These stakeholders all want peace between Israel and Palestine within the framework of a two-state solution where two states—one Palestinian and the other Israeli—live side by side in peace (Opinion Leader's Survey 2007).

Theoretical Framework

The conflict between Israel and Palestine is intensely complex with a multiplicity of actors, influences, causes, and desired outcomes. This paper searches for a degree of clarity in the confusion by focusing on U.S.–Israeli and U.S.–Palestinian interaction and analyzing the effects of these relationships on the PA's domestic politics and the impact on the peace process between Israel and Palestine. In order to understand these relationships, a number of assumptions must be made regarding how states interact with one another, how states formulate and implement foreign policy, and how domestic actors within a government vie
for political power. The study of interstate relations is embodied under the wide umbrella of international relations (IR) theory. Traditionally, IR theory has assumed that the state is a unitary actor in the international arena, thereby neglecting the formative dynamics of foreign policy within the state that are critical to the analyses conducted in this paper. Therefore, I will first establish the theoretical framework that pertains to interstate interaction. Secondly, I will use foreign policy analysis (FPA) to establish a theoretical basis through which the study of intrastate foreign policy formulation is conducted. Finally, I will look at the assumptions made in public choice theory in order to provide the framework to analyze the political struggle within the PA between Hamas and Fatah.

In IR theory, there are various schools of thought through which scholars view and interpret interaction between states, the most dominant of which is Realism. According to the Realist tradition, states are unitary actors in an anarchic international system making rational decisions with the goal of preserving their individual sovereignty (Teti 2002). Therefore, each state, acting as a unitary entity, is capable of formulating various foreign policy options and then implementing the option that best enhances the state's power in the international community. States are assumed to be unitary actors because each decision-making group within a state is a rational actor sharing a common goal of self-preservation (Levy 1997). According to rational choice theory, if an actor is rational, it weighs all options and finds the one that is best as defined by its preferences and constraints. When faced with decisions, each decision-maker within a state will rationally analyze the situation and come to the same rational conclusion. Thus, states are unitary actors when competing in the international arena.

Realism describes the acquisition and loss of power between these primary actors as a zero-sum scenario that results in a "balance of power" approach to maintaining stability in the international system (Walz 1979). Kathleen Christison, a former CIA political analyst, used this basic tenet of Realism to illustrate the downfalls of U.S. policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (1997). Christison wrote that U.S. policy has continuously favored Israel, thereby maintaining an imbalanced distribution of power between Israel and Palestine (1997, 47). According to the Realist tradition, this lack of balance of power perpetuates the conflict between the two countries.

While Realism adequately describes the interactions between states, it has been criticized for its oversimplification of the international system and neglect of the domestic foreign policy formulation process (Teti 2002, 10). A pluralistic approach has developed within the Realist tradition to account for actors other than states in the international arena (such as intergovernmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and multinational corporations). In the realm of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, pluralism has been used to factor in the effects of the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and a host of other organizations that are actively participating in the conflict.

Pluralism also incorporates more nuanced approaches to rational choice to account for the non-unitary reality of decision making within a state. Work by economists Eda Karni and Zvi Safra recounted the growing acknowledgment that rational choice theory does not accurately account for the vast number of inputs that go into each decision and the variance among decision-makers' interpretations of these inputs (1987). Recognizing these limitations of rational choice allows Pluralism to provide a theoretical framework that more accurately
reflects the true nature of foreign policy decision making. Robert Keohane, a professor at Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School of International Affairs, argued, “The next major step forward in understanding international cooperation will have to incorporate domestic politics fully into the analysis—not on a merely ad hoc basis, but systematically” (Waever 1996, 21). This Pluralistic approach is known as foreign policy analysis.

Foreign policy analysis (FPA) is based on the premise that the ground upon which all IR theory is built is the formulation of foreign policy (Hudson 2005). This situates FPA as the intersection of IR theory and public policy, thereby opening it up to influences from a wide range of disciplines and theories. According to FPA, foreign policy is technically formulated and implemented by a network of government agencies, but this process is greatly influenced by a complex web of international organizations, public opinions, personalities, and domestic organizations. This pluralistic approach of looking at foreign policy “allows us to look into the ‘black box’ of the state, allowing us a better understanding of the complex genesis of foreign policy” (Teti 2002, 10). However, the difficulty of building an effective theory for understanding foreign policy formulation cannot be understated when one considers the seemingly infinite number of actors, influences, motivations, variables, and possible policies that exist for each policy decision. In a critique of FPA, Ole Waever noted that the difficulty of integrating domestic and international explanations for foreign policy has led to disappointment with FPA within the IR discipline (1996, 21).

Despite the limitations of FPA in applying a cohesive theory to both the domestic and international factors of foreign affairs, no superior theories have been developed to date. FPA remains the only significant attempt to bridge the interrelated realms of domestic foreign policy formulation and its implementation in the international system. Hence, FPA’s focus on the domestic factors of foreign policy is the gateway through which I have analyzed the influence of the Israel Lobby on U.S. foreign policy. The seminal work on this topic, the Israel Lobby by Walt and Mearsheimer, is an in-depth look at the Israel Lobby and its effects on U.S. foreign policy (2006). The authors asserted in their opening statements that “the overall thrust of U.S. policy in the region is due almost entirely to U.S. domestic politics, and especially to the activities of the Israel Lobby” (2006, 2). Although they did not formulate an explicit theory, all of their arguments took place within the domestic realm of foreign policy with an eye toward the impact of policy in the international system. This duality is best viewed and explored through the lens of FPA.

While looking at the causes of the rise of Hamas within Palestine, this paper posits that foreign influences inadvertently played a significant role in increasing domestic support for Hamas. Nevertheless, the actual struggle for political power between the two factions is a domestic issue within the PA. The underlying assumptions of public choice theory serve as a solid foundation upon which discussion of the internal politics of Palestine may take place (Scaff and Ingram 1987). Public choice studies the behavior of voters, politicians, and government officials as (mostly) self-interested agents. Their interactions in the domestic social system are based on self-interested actions that are determined by personal preferences. These preferences are defined by individuals or organizations with which an individual associates (e.g., Hamas and Fatah). Actors within the political process are rational, making choices that will maximize their satisfaction as defined by their preferences. Political parties rise and fall in
power as the preferences of constituents change. In a similar manner, political leaders pursue their preference for maintaining/increasing political power by making decisions according to the preferences of their sources of power—political parties they belong to, constituents they represent, and the government in which they work. Rubin (2006), Malki (2006), and Sharnasky (2006) all used assumptions grounded in public choice theory as they analyzed the reasons for Hamas’ rise to power.

This paper looks at the interplay of three actors on the international stage. Even in this relatively simple case study, the complex reality of international relations requires a number of interrelated yet different theoretical frameworks, each of which accounts for a unique sphere in which these actors operate. The patchwork of multiple theories that is required in this study limits the generalizations that may be drawn from its conclusions. This weakness illustrates that no adequate theory currently exists that is capable of accurately framing the causes and effects of foreign policy formulation and implementation. Further work towards constructing such a theory will continue to clarify the complex relationship between domestic factions and foreign policy implications.

Methodology

I conducted a content analysis through archival research, looking at the shift in power from Fatah to Hamas that occurred over a twelve-month period and led to Hamas’ victory in the January 2006 parliamentary elections. This content analysis was done using a database of day-by-day newswires coming out of the Occupied Territories. This database, the Monthly Media Monitoring Review (MMR), was collected by the Division on Palestinian Rights (DPR), a subsidiary of the United Nations Committee on the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP). I identified events, quotes, and actions that may have influenced or indicated the changing political tide. I also studied previous research that identified weak leadership, corruption, and an inability to satisfy public needs as chief causes of Fatah’s political demise. While compiling a narrative of the year leading up to the decisive elections, I integrated analyses of U.S. policy towards Israel and Palestine, including the role the Israel Lobby played in influencing that policy, in an effort to find the effects of U.S. policy on the shift in political power between Hamas and Fatah. The evidence suggested that the U.S. did not substantially support the PA as it had committed, which contributed to the PA’s inability to function as an effective governing power and provide essential public goods. As a result, the Palestinian people shifted their support to the only available alternative—Hamas.

The Israel Lobby and U.S. “Policy Schizophrenia”

A vital finding of this paper was that a key determinate of U.S. foreign policy is the influence of pro-Israel Lobby groups within the United States. While there are a significant number of organizations that share a mutual goal of promoting a pro-Israel agenda within the U.S., as stated previously, the most influential group is AIPAC (Lerner 2007).

The link between Israel and AIPAC has been identified by both former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and current Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. To a U.S. audience, Sharon said, “When people ask me how they can help Israel, I tell them—help AIPAC.” Olmert concurred, “Thank God we have AIPAC, the greatest supporter and friend we have in the
whole world.” Commenting on the power AIPAC wields in Congress, former Senator Ernest Hollings (D-SC) noted that “you can’t have an Israeli policy other than what AIPAC gives you” (Mearsheimer 2006, 31).

Building arguments on an FPA theoretical framework, Walt and Mearsheimer detailed the effects of the Israel Lobby on U.S. policy toward Israel and Palestine, writing, “Washington has given Israel wide latitude in dealing with the Occupied Territories, even when its actions were at odds with stated U.S. policy” (Mearsheimer 2006, 31). One third of all foreign aid leaving the U.S. makes its way to Israel, the sixteenth richest nation in the world (Zunes 2007). Israel receives an average of $3 billion in U.S. foreign aid annually, with an exclusive exemption from U.S. oversight on how the money is allocated. According to Walt and Mearsheimer, this exemption “makes it virtually impossible to prevent the money from being used for purposes that the U.S. opposes, like building settlements in the West Bank” (2006, 31). They concluded that “were it not for the lobby’s ability to work effectively within the American political system, the relationship between Israel and the United States would be far less intimate than it is today” (2006, 39).

Dumke effectively opened the proverbial black box of policy formulation by exposing how the Israel Lobby influences Congress. He reported that the Israel Lobby donates more money than any other foreign-oriented lobby to local, state, and federal elections ($42.3 million from 1982–2002 compared to $297,000 by pro-Arab groups during the same time period). He also cited a number of examples to show how the Israel Lobby politically punishes those who do not comply with its policy positions (Dumke 2006, 8). Uri Avnery, a prominent Israeli peace activist, noted, “Every few years the Jewish lobby ‘eliminates’ an American politician who does not support the Israeli government unconditionally. This is not done secretly, behind closed doors, but as a public ‘execution’” (Dumke 2006, 9). The onslaught of anti-Semitic accusations that were flung at Jimmy Carter following the publication of his book Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid is an excellent example of a political “execution” to which Avnery referred (Elliot 2007).

The power of the Israel Lobby is impressive but, in and of itself, it is not illegal or even unethical in terms of contemporary lobbying practices. AIPAC and other pro-Israel organizations play by the same rules as other interest groups; the greatest difference is simply that the Israel Lobby does it much better. Nevertheless, if the Israel Lobby supports Israel, as Sharon and Olmert declared, then the policies it seeks to implement should work to further Israeli efforts to achieve a lasting peace with Palestine in the context of a two-state solution, which are objectives supported by Israel’s most recent prime ministers (Elliot 2007).

**Losing an Opportunity**

As previously noted, a great deal of optimism surrounded Abbas’ election and the ceasefire agreed to in the February 2005 Sharm el-Sheik meeting. It appeared as though Abbas had the trust of Sharon and the support of the U.S. as long as he continued to implement needed political and security reforms. Armed with pledges for financial aid from the U.S. and a willingness to negotiate from Israel, Abbas returned from Sharm el-Sheik prepared to rein in Palestinian militias and respectfully work with Israel—two endeavors that would require risking his political power domestically, particularly among Palestinians wary of the
U.S. and Israel. An analysis of the months that followed showed that Abbas made significant efforts to maintain the Palestinian side of the ceasefire and to bridle Palestinian militias, all pursuant to U.S. foreign aid requirements. However, U.S. policy, with its customary influence from AIPAC, undermined the Palestinian president’s efforts. Without U.S. support, the peace process and Abbas’ political power began to unravel, evidenced by the disintegration of the ceasefire and the shift in public support from Abbas’ party, Fatah, to Hamas, as was manifested in the January 2006 elections.

The optimistic mood that existed following Sharm el-Sheik in February 2005 did not last long. On 25 February, a suicide bomber blew himself up at the Stage nightclub in Tel Aviv. The blast killed five Israeli youth and injured approximately fifty more. Immediately, Abbas denounced the attack as an attempt to sabotage the peace process and Israel just as quickly began to express doubts that Abbas could “tighten the screws” on militant groups within the Occupied Territories (United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights 2005). After recommitting Palestinian militias to cease attacks against Israel, Abbas made significant efforts to combat Palestinian militants. The UN Division for Palestinian Rights (2005) reported the following steps that Abbas took:

- Deployed a six hundred-man Palestinian security force with the mission to stop all attacks by Palestinian militants against Israel.
- Replaced security commanders who failed to stop attacks against Israel from originating in their respective areas.
- Denounced Hezbollah’s connection with Palestinian militants and dispatching senior PA officials to urge Hezbollah leaders to cease aiding Palestinian militias.
- Searched out and destroyed illegal arms caches and smuggling tunnels.
- Arrested Palestinians from all factions, including Fatah, suspected in collaborating with Palestinian militants.
- Persuaded Hamas to abide by the terms of the ceasefire and participate in parliamentary elections, thereby entering the political process for the first time.
- Held a conference in Cairo with representatives of thirteen Palestinian factions in an attempt to bring a stronger sense of unity among the various groups and to agree to changes in the Palestinian parliamentary election process in order to make the political process more pluralistic.
- Implemented widespread institutional reforms and reorganized PA security and police forces in order to bolster the PA’s monopoly on violence in the Occupied Territories.
- Forced the retirement of over 1,100 security officials who did not agree with PA efforts to fight Palestinians in order to halt violence against Israel.
- Formed technical committees comprised of forty-two Palestinian experts in “politics, security, planning, media, environment, and economics” in order to coordinate the planned Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.
- Threatened to use “an iron fist” against anyone who violated the ceasefire with Israel.
- Issued a decree banning civilians from carrying unlicensed weapons and then enforced the decree with arrests and fines.
- Demolished homes of Palestinian officials who had illegally obtained building material and property with public funds.
Abbas' aggressive efforts to enforce PA authority throughout the Occupied Territories prompted Aharon Zeevi, Israel's Military Intelligence chief general, to recognize that "there is determined action on [Abbas'] part in terms of his aims and intentions. [Mr. Abbas] has changed the people in his office, has limited incitement, and made changes in the legal sphere. He is succeeding to maintain the calm..." (United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights 2005).

Ironically, on the same day that Zeevi articulated Israeli acknowledgment of Abbas' efforts, the U.S. Senate approved House Resolution 1268, an emergency spending bill that dramatically undercut the PA. Leading up to the bill, Bush had asked his fellow Republicans in Congress to approve the foreign aid package he promised Abbas during the State of the Union Address. In the speech before Congress, Bush had promised Abbas $350 million if the Palestinian president continued to rein in militant groups within Palestine and worked towards developing a lasting peace with Israel—requirements that, according to Israel's senior intelligence official, Abbas had met. The money was to be used "to support Palestinian political, economic, social, and security reforms" (United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights 2005). This pledge was repeatedly confirmed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice throughout the spring of 2005. Congress responded to these U.S. commitments and Abbas' efforts by passing a measure that forbade direct assistance to the PA, even denying President Bush the customary right to waive restrictions in the interest of national security. The foreign aid package did so in an amazing display of bipartisanship with a 388-44 margin in the House and sailed through the Senate with equal force. The resulting aid deal was a far cry from the pledge Bush made to Abbas. The bill called for a trimmed offer of $200 million to be given to nongovernmental projects expressly outside the control of the PA. Interestingly, $50 million of the $200 million was allocated to the Israeli government to invest in more rigorous checkpoints throughout the Occupied Territories, thereby strengthening Israeli control over lands considered by the international community as being illegally occupied Palestinian territory per Articles 33, 53, and 147 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and Security Council Resolution 242. In a measure dubbed as "Palestinian Healthcare," the bill allocated $2 million to Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America (United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights 2005).

The effects of the congressional action were a "huge slap in the face" and a "startling setback to Abbas" according to Edward Abington Jr., a Washington-based PA consultant (Kessler 2005). Danny Ayalon, Israeli ambassador to the U.S., responded in support of the restrictions, saying that Abbas had been "very disappointing" due to his failure to confront Palestinian militant groups, a position that, as previously shown, was not supported by the facts or senior officials in Israel's intelligence corps (Kessler 2005). AIPAC was directly involved in the package's negotiations, playing its typical role as a lobbying group and conducting research for congressional representatives and senators (McArthur 2005). While it was difficult to investigate specific actions taken by AIPAC during the private negotiations surrounding HR 1268, it was telling to note that among the strongest advocates of stringent restrictions on aid to Abbas and the PA were Representative Tom Delay, House Majority Leader; Representative Nita Lowey, a member of the Appropriations Committee; and Representatives Tom Lantos and Shelley Berkley, of the International Relations Committee (McArthur 2005). In 2004, these four representatives were reported among the top ten recipients of pro-Israel PAC funds, netting a combined $499,493 over their careers (Galford 2004).
The Bush Administration had assured Abbas that U.S. aid would be sent to strengthen the PA, but the powerful Israel Lobby converted the policy so that in the end the PA was adversely affected. Not only did the lack of expected funds weaken the PA, but the rebuff from Washington also eroded public support among Palestinians for leaders who had justified cracking down on fellow Palestinians with promises for sorely needed political support and economic/humanitarian aid from the U.S.

Despite this significant setback, throughout May and June, Abbas continued his rhetoric against militant factions within the Occupied Territories, although with diminishing ability to maintain stability. From this period forward, Abbas' ability to maintain his political/security reforms and the ceasefire with Israel began to deteriorate at an increasingly rapid pace. On 21 June, Abbas and Sharon met for two hours in Sharon's official residence in Jerusalem. Comments following the meeting indicated a significant change in tone from both leaders. Following the meeting, Abbas and Sharon did not meet together as planned in a joint press conference, and Abbas refused to address journalists as he had scheduled, instead sending PA Prime Minister Qureia to meet with members of the media. Qureia reported, “This was a difficult meeting, and did not live up to our expectations. In all the basic issues for which we were expecting positive responses, there were none” (United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights 2005). The events and comments that followed the meeting were strong indicators of the pessimism that existed within the PA and the changing tide in the peace process.

In July, with the unilateral withdrawal of Israel from the Gaza Strip fast approaching, the circumstances on the ground continued to grow more complicated for Abbas and the PA. Sensing weakness, and in response to Israel's announcement of the final route of the Separation Barrier through East Jerusalem, a route that would cut off 55,000 Palestinians from the rest of the city, Islamic Jihad successfully carried out two suicide attacks on 12 July. Fortunately, no one other than the militants involved in the bombings was injured, and PA leaders denounced the bombings as attacks against the peace process (United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights 2005). Regarding the Separation Barrier, Abbas expressed growing frustration over the failures in the peace process. He said, “The [East Jerusalem wall] plan is totally rejected. I don't believe that carrying out such measures by the Israeli Government would bring peace or security, instead it puts obstacles on the road to peace” (United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights 2005). PA Prime Minister Qureia added to Abbas' complaint, calling the plan “theft in broad daylight,” and stated, “This decision makes a farce of any talk about peace and turns the Gaza withdrawal into a useless initiative” (United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights 2005). Saeb Erakat, Chief Negotiator for the PA, said that Israel’s unilateral decision to build the wall on Palestinian territory was “determining the fate of Jerusalem before we begin negotiations” (United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights 2005). The unilateral nature of Israel's actions in building the Separation Barrier and its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip without working to ensure a smooth transition had great effects on Abbas' political power.

After reviewing the events that followed the failure of the U.S. to fulfill its commitment to Abbas and the PA, the stark difference in Abbas' ability to control the various Palestinian factions before and after House Bill 1268 and the overall mood of the peace process cannot be emphasized enough. Washington's lack of support, both financial and rhetorical, for the Palestinian cause significantly undermined Abbas, who had consistently worked to meet
the requirements set by the U.S. to receive badly needed economic support, support that unfortunately did not come.

August 2005 is remembered most for the unilateral withdrawal of all Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip and from four settlements in the West Bank. This move was discussed by Sharon and Abbas in Sharm el-Sheik as an opportunity for the PA to have territory exclusively its own to govern. While the pullout occurred, Israel only allowed one gateway between Gaza and the outside world, placing extreme pressure on the PA’s ability to effectively build an economy and govern the area. On 23 August, just eight days after the well publicized withdrawal from Gaza, Prime Minister Sharon initiated the largest West Bank settlement expansion yet, confiscating an area larger than the Gaza Strip between East Jerusalem and the Ma’ale Adumim settlement. After the completion of the expansion, there would only be thirteen kilometers between the newly confiscated land and the Jordanian border, leaving the West Bank nearly divided into northern and southern halves. Regarding the expansion, PA Chief Negotiator Saeb Erakat said, “Such decisions will only serve to undermine any efforts to resume negotiations,” adding, “This will destroy President Bush’s vision of a two-state solution” (United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights 2005). President Bush was silent on the issue, opting instead to continue to praise Israel for its withdrawal from Gaza and put pressure on the PA to halt all attacks coming out of the Occupied Territories (United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights 2005).

The last four months of Fatah’s control of the PA were marred by increasing hostilities between Israel and Palestine. From 15–17 October, Israeli Defense Forces arrested hundreds of Palestinians. Abbas objected to the arrests but did not have the power to translate his objections into any concessions by Israel, and the U.S. took no action to pressure Israel to abide by the terms of the peace agreement. Israeli raids on Palestinian leaders began to increase through November and December, and Palestinian militias stepped up rocket and mortar attacks on Israeli outposts during the same period (United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights 2005). Just a few months after Sharon and Abbas shook hands in Sharm el-Sheik, the fragile peace they brokered was all but lost.

The Fall of Fatah and the Rise of Hamas

On 25 January 2006, the political landscape within the PA changed abruptly. In a surprising victory, Hamas won 74 of 132 seats on the Palestinian Legislative Council, allowing it to form the PA government on its own (United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights 2005). In order to distance itself from the radical image of Hamas, members of Fatah boycotted the new government, refusing any positions within it. Acting Prime Minister Olmert announced that Israel would not hold any negotiations with a government comprised of members of Hamas, and the U.S. led a boycott of Western aid to the Hamas-led PA. In the days leading to the election, Hamas made it clear that if elected into power, it did not intend to accept peace with Israel or renounce violence as a means to accomplish its political goals (United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights 2005). This put an indefinite stop to the peace process and led to increased violence between Israel and Palestine as well as between Hamas and Fatah factions within Palestine. The effects of the increased isolation of the PA within both Gaza and the West Bank and the freeze placed on foreign aid and Palestinian tax revenues were felt by
Palestinians throughout the Occupied Territories. The prospects for peace that had existed one year before were lost, and the consequences included an increase in the number of lives lost and a decrease in the living conditions in the West Bank. This tragedy entered a new stage with a dim prospect for peace.

There is consensus as to why Fatah lost power in the period preceding the election. Barry Rubin cited weak leadership as the chief cause of Fatah’s demise. Rubin saw the situation through a public choice lens by viewing the PA’s ability to meet the needs of its people (accommodate the preferences of its constituents) as the measure of its strength (2006). Since the PA was unable to provide adequate health care, education, and security for its people, the leadership is categorized as weak. Riad Malki, director of the Palestinian Center for the Dissemination of Democracy and Community Development, agreed with Rubin that the fall of Fatah may be attributed to the lack of progress it achieved in the Occupied Territories. He argued that insecurities stemming from the stalled peace efforts and the failed political initiatives of Palestinian leaders weakened Fatah. Abbas did not have the ability to translate his consistent optimism with real results in the lives of Palestinians (Malki 2006). Economic progress was also elusive for the PA. In the weeks leading up to the election, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said, “The number of Palestinians living in poverty had risen to 64 percent from 55 percent last year. Half of those living in poverty, or 1.2 million Palestinians, lived on less than $1.60 a day, 60 cents below the poverty line” (United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights 2005).

This brief review of literature on the subject shows that Abbas’ PA failed to deliver needed social, political, security, and economic reforms. As would be expected with a public choice perspective, the Palestinian electorate shifted its support away from Fatah. It is interesting to note that the aid package Bush committed to Abbas’ Fatah-led PA was intended to support these very facets of the PA’s capacity to govern. When Bush initially proposed the direct aid to Abbas in his 2005 State of the Union Address, he cited the need to “promote [Palestinian] democracy” through “supporting Palestinian political, economic, and security reforms” (Bush 2005). This support never came, but the very aspects of society that the Bush administration identified as critical to an effective PA were indeed the key issues that spurred the shift in public support away from Fatah to Hamas.

It is unreasonable to assume that had the U.S. made good on its pledged financial assistance, Abbas would have brought about monumental improvements in the lives of average Palestinians in the six months leading up to the parliamentary elections. However, as previously noted, in the first five months of his presidency and in accordance with the Sharm el Sheik agreements, Abbas focused his efforts on reining in militant groups through security reform and in persuading Hamas and other Palestinian factions to participate, for the first time, in the political process. Abbas invested heavily in these security reforms with the assurance from the U.S. that if progress was made, outside support from the U.S. would come to fund the economic and political reforms that were critical to Abbas’ domestic support. While Abbas’ progress was tenuous, steps in the right direction were made, and it is reasonable to conclude that the promised support from the U.S. would have strengthened Abbas’ political power and enabled him to begin the economic reforms that would most benefit average Palestinians, thereby garnering the necessary support to win the 2006 parliamentary elections.
Conclusion

What would have happened if the U.S. had upheld its commitments to Abbas and provided his government with $350 million in direct aid? What policy would the U.S. have pursued if the Israel Lobby did not have as much influence on the U.S. legislative branch, and what alternative outcomes would have been possible if the policies pursued by AIPAC served to further the development of a two-state solution instead of undermining the growth of moderate elements within the PA? Definitive answers to these questions may not be possible, but after reviewing the events leading to the disintegration of this round of the peace process, I conclude that the possibility for alternative outcomes, outcomes constructive to the peace process, would have been higher if the U.S. had lent Abbas its full support.

The months leading up to the 2006 elections and the Hamas victory show that if the PA is unable to provide for its people, then, given the opportunity, the people will register their discontent by voting for change. Polls immediately following Hamas’ victory show that, despite a majority of Palestinians voting for Hamas, 75 percent of Palestinians supported a negotiated peace with Israel, a position that is an anathema to Hamas’ ideological foundations (Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research 2006). This shows that when the Israel Lobby stopped the U.S. from supporting a moderate PA, public support shifted from ruling moderates to the opposition that, in the Palestinian case, is comprised of extremists who vow to defend their cause at all costs. These developments, for obvious reasons, are detrimental to Israel, the U.S., and all those who desire peace, and are an excellent example of what happens when the U.S. superficially supports the PA while concurrently maintaining a staunch pro-Israeli policy, consequently worsening the situation.

As future opportunities for peace arise, it is critical that the U.S. recognize these inherent flaws in past peace efforts. Given widespread commitment for a two-state solution, it is imperative to the peace process that all stakeholders committed to peace work to build a viable Palestinian state. Thus, all parties supporting a two-state solution, including Israel, the PA, and the U.S., should work together to implement necessary policy reforms to ensure cooperative support of moderate Palestinians. Only when positive rhetoric is backed with real, productive action will progress be made in this seemingly never-ending tragedy. Peace can come, and hope should exist, so long as policymakers courageously hold themselves and others accountable for fulfilling commitments and pursuing a course consistent with a two-state solution.

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