



Brandeis University

Crown Center  
for Middle East Studies

Mailstop 010  
Waltham, Massachusetts  
02454-9110

781-736-5320  
781-736-5324 Fax  
www.brandeis.edu/crown

# Middle East Brief

*Judith and Sidney Swartz Director  
and Professor of Politics*  
**Shai Feldman**

*Associate Director*  
**Kristina Cherniahivsky**

*Charles (Corky) Goodman Professor  
of Middle East History and  
Associate Director for Research*  
**Naghmeb Sohrabi**

*Senior Fellow*  
**Abdel Monem Said Aly, PhD**

*Goldman Senior Fellow*  
**Khalil Shikaki, PhD**

*Myra and Robert Kraft Professor  
of Arab Politics*  
**Eva Bellin**

*Henry J. Leir Professor of the  
Economics of the Middle East*  
**Nader Habibi**

*Sylvia K. Hassenfeld Professor  
of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies*  
**Kanan Makiya**

*Renée and Lester Crown Professor  
of Modern Middle East Studies*  
**Pascal Menoret**

*Neubauer Junior Research Fellow*  
**Richard A. Nielsen, PhD**

*Junior Research Fellows*  
**Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee, PhD**  
**Hikmet Kocamaner, PhD**  
**David Siddhartha Patel, PhD**  
**Jean-Louis Romanet Perroux**

## The End of the “Abbas Decade”: The Crumbling of the post-Intifada Status-Quo

**Khalil Shikaki**

A decade of no war, no peace in Palestinian-Israeli relations is now coming to an end. The post-intifada status quo that prevailed in the West Bank during the 2005–15 period is currently being challenged by two escalating developments: The Palestinian Authority (PA), which contributed significantly to its creation, is rebelling against it, with PA president Mahmoud Abbas threatening to dismantle the Oslo Accords; and the Palestinian public, which facilitated that status quo, is now taking matters into its own hands and is on the verge of plunging the West Bank into violence. Abbas, without whom the post-intifada design would have been unthinkable, may or may not survive the turmoil, but it is almost certain that the “Abbas Decade” that he shaped will not survive.

An end to the intifada status quo will likely bring with it a serious deterioration in Palestinian-Israeli relations along with the reemergence in Palestinian-controlled areas of armed factions, thereby posing a major threat to the PA’s monopoly over force. This Brief discusses the drivers of this twin escalation and where it might be heading.

## The No War, No Peace Architecture

Slowly (and quietly) but surely, a post-second intifada “status quo” emerged in 2005 and became stronger over the next few years. The new status quo, an architecture based mostly on formal and informal instruments and both *de jure* and *de facto* arrangements and outcomes, can best be described as a no war, no peace condition. It goes without saying that this description applied to Israeli-Palestinian relations in the West Bank only. The Gaza Strip, starting in mid-2007, took a different path, when Hamas resorted to force against President Abbas and asserted its full control over that Palestinian area; since then, Gaza-Israel relations have been characterized by continual conflict and occasional war. By contrast, the Abbas decade was one of generally peaceful relations with Israel, punctuated by occasional disagreements and political quarrels.

Four characteristics in particular marked the Abbas decade. First, the new order was mostly about the restoration of peace and quiet after five years of intifada: Hence the “no war” dimension of the decade. Palestinian security services were to be rebuilt with American assistance in a context of renewed coordination with the Israeli security establishment. Second, the new era was characterized by the PA’s assertion of a monopoly over the use of force—another “no war” dimension. In coordination with their Israeli counterparts, the retrained Palestinian security services disarmed all militant groups, including those of Fatah and Hamas.

Third, the new era was characterized by the consolidation of Israel’s position in the West Bank, reversing many of the Palestinian Oslo gains; this was the first of two “no peace” dimensions. Palestinian-Israeli security coordination and the PA security services crackdown on armed factions in the West Bank were not conditional on restoration to pre-intifada conditions—so Israel kept its West Bank intifada gains, such as continued IDF deployment throughout the West Bank with daily incursions into Palestinian cities, and the maintenance of hundreds of checkpoints, including in some cases in the area designated “A,” which according to the Oslo Accords was to be under full PA civil and security control. Furthermore, Palestinian police and customs presence at the international crossings with Jordan was terminated. The wall and separation barrier, erected by Israel in the West Bank during the second intifada, remained in place; and Palestinian access to Israeli markets, for labor and goods, was severely restricted. Other policies, most importantly Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, continued without interruption. In 2005, after the Israeli evacuation of the Gaza Strip, there were a little over 250,000 settlers in the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem); in 2015, the number of settlers in the same area stood at about 400,000, about a 60 percent increase.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the Oslo Accords, both their interim aspects and the remaining unfulfilled Israeli obligations, were essentially suspended, which constituted a second dimension of “no peace.” According to the original agreement, the temporary arrangements stipulated by the Oslo Accords were to be replaced by permanent ones within five years from the date of implementation of the Declaration of Principles (DOP), known as Oslo I. The DOP went into effect in 1994, upon Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area, but remained operational long after its intended expiration in 1999, owing to the failure of the two sides to reach a permanent agreement by that year.

Dr. Khalil Shikaki is the Director of the Palestinian Center for Political and Survey Research in Ramallah and is the Goldman Senior Fellow at the Crown Center.

*The opinions and findings expressed in this Brief belong to the author exclusively and do not reflect those of the Crown Center or Brandeis University.*

Equally importantly, by 2005, Israel had not yet carried out some of its most important obligations: most vitally, for the Palestinians, the third redeployment from area C, the opening of a seaport, and arranging for “safe passage” between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

## The Drivers of the No War, No Peace “Abbas Decade”

The 2000–2004 second intifada served essentially as a backdrop to the new reality. More than one thousand Israelis and five thousand Palestinians were killed during some of the worst Israeli-Palestinian violence since the beginning of the conflict in the first half of the twentieth century. Israeli-Palestinian security coordination was suspended; the Israeli army reoccupied the West Bank; PA security services were devastated and PA civil institutions considerably weakened; and the Palestinian economy was devastated. Moreover, PA president Yasser Arafat died—most Palestinians say poisoned—right around the end of this period, and the mainstream nationalist movement Fatah lost considerable public support while the Islamist Hamas gained significant popularity.

The post-intifada status quo—the Abbas decade of no war, no peace—stood on five legs, one indispensable one being Abbas himself. Three other legs were provided by the Palestinian domestic environment and one leg was provided by the United States, supported by the donor community and the main Arab regional powers.

Without Abbas, who was elected president in 2005 with 63 percent of the vote, it would have been impossible for the new status quo to emerge. Indeed, this outcome had all the hallmarks of the methods and mindset of the new president. Abbas viewed the armed violence of the second intifada—what he called the “militarization of the intifada”—as destructive to Palestinian national interests. He was determined to put an end to the violence, and believed that direct bilateral negotiations with Israel were the key to making peace. Equally importantly, Abbas invoked a second policy dimension that would set the stage for the post-intifada status quo: He was committed to a policy he termed “One authority, one gun,” reflecting his determination to dismantle armed groups that had emerged during the intifada. Finally, Abbas held to a third principle that contributed significantly to the evolving outcome of the 2005–15 period: He, one of the main architects of the interim agreement that was Oslo, now expressed strong opposition to any new interim agreements. Fearful that an interim or “provisional” Palestinian state, one of the three phases of the Quartet’s

so-called “Roadmap,” would become permanent, Abbas refused all but a permanent status agreement.

A second pillar of the Abbas decade was provided by Hamas. During the 2006–7 period, the emergence of Hamas’ threat to the PA’s national hegemony, and the direct military threat it posed to Abbas’ authority—evidenced most dramatically in the violent takeover of the Gaza Strip—provided the new Palestinian leadership with an enormous motivation to improve Israeli-Palestinian relations. A third pillar was introduced by Salam Fayyad, the Palestinian prime minister between 2007 and 2013. “Fayyadism,” a notion that promoted Palestinian self-reliance and empowerment, argued that Palestinians could end the Israeli occupation by building the institutions of a future Palestinian state—thereby creating, in effect, a *de facto* Palestinian state—rather than by violence or even through peace negotiations. This notion gained local and international support, with Fayyad himself arguing that Palestinian state-building efforts would have a transformative impact on all concerned, and thereby would remove any Israeli pretext for continued occupation.

Another domestic dynamic—public support—provided a fourth leg for the Abbas decade. Not only did the public elect Abbas, who made no efforts whatsoever to hide his views, but it also supported his efforts to end chaos and anarchy and enforce law and order. Moreover, two months after Abbas’ election, in a reflection of ‘intifada fatigue,’ public support for violence, including suicide attacks inside Israel, had dropped sharply, from over 70 percent six months earlier to 29 percent.<sup>2</sup> Optimistic about the chances for peace with Israel now that Arafat was no longer leading the PA, an overwhelming majority (84 percent) supported returning to negotiations. And 59 percent believed that with Abbas now leading the PA, it was possible to reach a compromise agreement with the Israeli leadership.

The last leg of the post-intifada status quo was provided by the United States, the international donor community, and the Arab regional system. The role of the U.S. was the most critical. In the post-intifada period, as part of “Roadmap” implementation, the U.S. took upon itself the goal of rebuilding the Palestinian security forces. Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton, who headed the U.S. security mission in Jerusalem between 2005 and 2010, oversaw the training of various Palestinian battalions. As important as Dayton’s work was, the U.S. role in the peace process was even more important. The Annapolis peace process, initiated by the Bush administration at a peace summit in November 2007; Barack Obama’s efforts in 2009 linking resumption of negotiations to a settlement freeze; and John Kerry’s 2013–14 efforts to reach a permanent peace agreement in



nine months succeeded in reviving a process that had been dormant for seven years by bringing the two sides into direct bilateral negotiations. Although all these efforts failed, they did manage to embed within the Abbas decade a highly ambitious peace agenda. Security coordination, and the peace and quiet it engendered, seemed thereby to have a purpose: to facilitate both the end of occupation and Palestinian state-building. Without this agenda, it would have been impossible for the post-intifada status quo to last beyond its first few years.

Immediately after the holding of the Annapolis peace summit, the donor community, meeting in Paris in December 2007 and comprising some seventy countries, pledged a massive \$7.4 billion, in the strongest show of support to date for the PA and the evolving Palestinian-Israeli relationship. Furthermore, three regional Arab states played a highly important role in shaping the Abbas decade: Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt. After years of reluctance to support the Oslo process, Saudi Arabia pledged as much as \$1.25 billion at the 2007 Paris donor conference; and between 2006 and 2007, the Saudis played a significant role in reducing tension between Fatah and Hamas. Jordan served as a base for the American-supported training of the Palestinian National Forces (PNF). And Egypt, under three presidents—Hosni Mubarak, Mohammad Morsi, and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi—helped Abbas and Hamas manage differences between themselves as well as with Israel. This Egyptian role helped to ensure that three Hamas-Israel Gaza wars—in 2008, 2012, and 2014—would not destroy or even seriously destabilize the Abbas decade.

## The Abbas Decade Coming to an End

Most of the legs upon which the post-intifada architecture stood are now crumbling. By 2014, other demands on U.S. foreign policy attention meant that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was no longer a priority. With Kerry's Middle East peacemaking efforts failing early in 2014, the U.S. now entered a phase of serious negotiations with Iran on a nuclear deal. Mosul fell to ISIS in June, and issues revolving around terrorism, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and the South China Sea were soon ascendant. When, early in 2015, the French came up with the idea of going to the UN Security Council to help restart Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, the Americans wanted the efforts postponed until after a deal with Iran was reached in order to avoid further worsening their relationship with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The Arab region became at least as distracted as the U.S. By 2011, the Arab Spring had already diverted attention away from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. And by 2015, the region was buried under the burdens of civil wars and regime change, not to mention the threats from Iran and ISIS and conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya.

With the international as well as the regional focus elsewhere, Israel's right-wing government was busy building settlements and weakening the prospects for a two-state solution. Although he retracted the statement later, in March 2015, during the Israeli election campaign, Netanyahu asserted that a Palestinian state would not be created under his watch if he was re-elected. In July, settler violence against Palestinian villagers became lethal when radical settlers firebombed a Palestinian home in the village of Duma in area B of the West Bank, resulting in the death of three family members. Tension in the second half of 2015 in Jerusalem's holy places also generated great volatility, especially in the most sensitive area in the occupied territories: the al-Aqsa Mosque. The perceived rising threat represented by Jewish national-religious groups and sentiments, along with the fear that Israel was intent on changing the status quo on al-Haram al-Sharif (the Temple Mount), incited violent action by individuals and groups.

By September 2015, the Palestinian domestic environment had changed radically in other respects. The Palestinian public withdrew legitimacy from the PA, with 53 percent telling pollsters that they viewed the PA as a burden rather than an asset. For the first time since the PA's creation, 51 percent wanted to see it dissolved. Two-thirds of Palestinians wanted Abbas to resign as president of the PA; only 38 percent were satisfied with his performance. In a hypothetical election, Abbas lost to Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh by 44 percent to 49 percent, and in December he lost to Haniyeh, in another hypothetical election, by 41 percent to 51 percent.

Moreover, optimism among the Palestinian public had declined considerably by 2015, with 78 percent believing that the chances for establishing a Palestinian state next to the State of Israel in the next five years were slim to nonexistent and only 21 percent believing the chances were medium or high. In September 2015, 67 percent of Palestinians believed that the two-state solution was no longer viable, and support for that solution had declined considerably to 48 percent, declining further three months later to 45 percent. The decline in support for violence early in the Abbas decade, referenced above, was now reversed: By 2010 it stood at 40 percent, but by September 2015 it had risen to 57 percent and by December, to 67 percent.

One of the most important sociopolitical developments during the past few years involved Palestinian youth. By 2015, an “Oslo generation” had matured. Born around the time of the signing of the Oslo agreement, youths between the ages of 18 and 22—alienated from the political process, highly secular, and almost totally reliant on social media—now expressed strong opposition to the two-state solution, and almost three-quarters of male youths supported a return to an armed intifada.

Finally, over time, the man behind the Abbas decade grew weaker and weaker. Having failed to deliver on the peace process, or to reunify the West Bank and the Gaza Strip despite significant Hamas concessions, Abbas’ popularity gradually declined, and once his electoral term ended in 2010, his legitimacy was questioned. As a result, Abbas grew weaker both within Fatah and within the PLO. His decision in August 2015 to convene an emergency meeting of the PLO’s National Council (PNC) was challenged by his own Fatah colleagues and by most members of the PLO Executive Committee. Abbas had no choice but to concede, and to postpone the meeting. A weakened Abbas is now forced to embrace more confrontational policies with Israel, and to take a tougher stand regarding peace negotiations.

## What’s Next?

During the first two months of the current confrontations, which started in October 2015, ninety-seven Palestinians and twenty Israelis were killed. But so far the conflict remains limited in scope and magnitude: leaderless, with limited popular participation and without clear organization or a clear goal. The prospects for significant escalation remain great, however. The conflict might take a different shape than the one we see today, which is characterized by PA threats to dismantle the Oslo Accords, limited youth confrontations with soldiers at checkpoints, and knifings by lone wolves. Over time, the dynamics described above are likely to become more consequential and more dangerous: The momentum is evident, the domestic ground is fertile, and an outside counteracting intervention is unlikely. Though it is impossible to predict the form any future escalation might take—mass Palestinian demonstrators and Israeli troops and settlers, armed and/or suicide attacks, or general chaos and anarchy—it is possible to speculate that any such escalation is likely to unfold gradually.

The gradualism of the anticipated escalation is likely to be driven by four factors, all of which reflect dissimilarities with conditions in 2000, when the second intifada erupted and quickly escalated into all-out war. First, Abbas, unlike

Arafat and despite his increasing weakness, remains in control of Fatah, including its young guard as well as former members of the al-Aqsa Brigades. He is supported by the PA elite and by the private sector; both fear the consequences of a PA collapse and have a vested interest in continued peace and quiet. Second, unlike the PA security services of the 1990s, the current forces, thanks to U.S. training and Abbas’ and Fayyad’s resolve, are much more professional, independent of Fatah, and subject to the civilian control of the president and the prime minister. Demoralization, the most significant threat to the cohesion of the PNF, is likely to occur gradually and only after several major armed clashes in which scores of Palestinians are killed.

Third, although the perceived threat from Hamas to Fatah and the PA is not as grave or urgent as it was early in the Abbas decade, the Islamist faction remains a formidable adversary. Unlike the situation in 2000, when a military alliance between Fatah’s young guard and Hamas was conceivable, such an alliance is now unthinkable, at least in the near future. Attempts by some Fatah leaders in the Gaza Strip, such as Muhammad Dahlan or the former PA prime minister, Salam Fayyad, to improve relations with Hamas are not likely to have any immediate impact on conditions in the West Bank. In other words, it is highly unlikely that the PA will tolerate a Hamas-triggered military escalation or that Fatah would join in any such escalation.

Finally, the behavior of the Israeli army in the West Bank, as evidenced by the measures it has taken in the first two months of the current confrontations and those it has not taken, is likely to discourage rapid and abrupt escalation. In 2000, the army used excessive force and immediately imposed a comprehensive closure regime. These and other collective punishment measures contributed significantly to increased outrage and to the radicalization of the larger Palestinian public, thus increasing the demand for revenge. So far the Israeli army has not imposed a full closure, used excessive force, or targeted organizers for assassination. Security coordination with the Palestinian security services remains largely in effect. But the current, smarter Israeli response is not sustainable. Under pressure from the Israeli public and Israel’s right-wing government, the army has already returned to the policy of home demolitions, despite evidence that it is counterproductive.

## Abbas’ Policy Options and the Future of the Two-State Solution

It is difficult to predict the impact of the current escalation of tensions, now or in the near future, on long-term Israeli-

Palestinian relations. Three outcomes are possible. At one point in the future, continued escalation might increase pressure from the Israeli public for separation from Palestinians in the West Bank, in the expectation that such a move would improve safety and security for Israelis and help maintain a Jewish and democratic future for the State of Israel. Unilateral disengagement in the West Bank, reducing the footprint of the Israeli army and the settlements, might help maintain the goal of a two-state solution. Alternatively, intensified escalation might lead to the collapse of the PA and increase the Palestinian public's demand for radical alternatives, including a one-state solution. But a PA collapse might lead to a third outcome, the worst outcome considered in this Brief. Without an effective PA to deliver services and enforce order, extreme religious and political radicalization might set in.

It is highly unlikely that the current right-wing government in Israel, with its reliance on settlers to maintain its parliamentary coalition, would opt for a unilateral withdrawal, no matter how limited, that would require evacuation of settlers. Rather, increased Palestinian violence might in fact lead to greater Israeli deployment in the West Bank and even a return to its direct re-occupation, a step that might increase the likelihood of a PA collapse. Such an Israeli reinstatement of its "civil administration," entailing the assumption of full civil responsibility over three million Palestinians in the West Bank, would consolidate a one-state reality and generate an even greater Palestinian demand for a one-state solution. Alternatively, an Israeli decision *not* to assume civil control over the Palestinian population might lead to heightened chaos and increase the likelihood of the third outcome above.

In the meanwhile, although Abbas is under strong pressure from the Palestinian public and from his own colleagues in Fatah and the PLO to support the current escalation of tensions, his security services and his own instincts are clearly pushing against it. Supporters of escalation claim that it provides him with leverage he currently does not have. Those counseling against escalation, on the other hand, argue that it might quickly get out of control, in which case only Hamas would benefit and he would be one of its first casualties. But given Abbas' diminished credibility among both Palestinians and Israelis, it is doubtful that he can contain the confrontations without being able to claim a clear political achievement, such as an Israeli settlement freeze or a significant transfer of territorial jurisdiction in area C to the Palestinian side. Without such an achievement, Abbas can at best remain neutral.

Increased future escalation, however, might force Abbas' hands. A more radicalized public and a demoralized security sector might lead to greater violence. In such a case, Abbas might have to choose between three options: 1) tolerating a low level of violence, thus angering the Israelis and forcing them to act against him and his security services; 2) trying to stem the violence, thus angering the Palestinian public and risking his own irrelevance; or 3) implementing his threat to dismantle Oslo by taking steps in that direction, most likely starting by reducing security coordination and thereby bringing the PA closer to a gradual collapse. All three scenarios point in the same grim direction.

## Endnotes

- 1 For details, please see the regular reports by the Foundation for Middle East Peace on "Israeli Settlement in the occupied territories."\*
- 2 Public opinion findings mentioned in this Brief are taken from polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research.\*

\*Weblinks are available in the online version at [www.brandeis.edu/crown](http://www.brandeis.edu/crown)



Brandeis University Crown Center  
for Middle East Studies

Mailstop 010  
Waltham, Massachusetts  
02454-9110

781-736-5320  
781-736-5324 Fax  
[www.brandeis.edu/crown](http://www.brandeis.edu/crown)

## Middle East Brief

### The End of the “Abbas Decade”: The Crumbling of the post-Intifada Status-Quo

Khalil Shikaki

---

Recent Middle East Briefs:

Available on the Crown Center website: [www.brandeis.edu/crown](http://www.brandeis.edu/crown)

Seyedamir Hossein Mahdavi, “Can the Vienna Agreement Solve Iran’s Problems?,”  
No. 96

Abdel Monem Said Aly and Shai Feldman, “Saving the Middle East,” No. 95

Sarah El-Kazaz, “The AKP and the Gülen: The End of a Historic Alliance,” No. 94

Jean-Louis Romanet Perroux, “Libya’s Untold Story: Civil Society Amid Chaos,”  
No. 93

Asher Susser, “Jordan Facing Up to the ISIS Challenge: A Net Assessment,” No. 92

