

PolicyWatch #1410 : Special Forum Report

## Negotiating Under Fire

Featuring [Matthew Levitt](#) , Ghaith al-Omari, and Dennis Ross  
October 10, 2008

*On October 3, 2008, Matthew Levitt, Ghaith al-Omari, and Dennis Ross addressed a Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to honor the launch of Dr. Levitt's new book, Negotiating Under Fire. Dr. Levitt is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and the director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. Mr. al-Omari, a former advisor to Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, is currently the advocacy director at the American Task Force on Palestine. Ambassador Ross is an independent consultant to The Washington Institute and has previously served in senior foreign policy positions in the Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Clinton administrations. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

### Matthew Levitt

A peace process is not necessarily a peaceful process. Negotiations do not occur in a vacuum, and external events -- violent attacks, in particular -- have a direct impact on the process. Terrorist attacks upset the negotiation process by freezing whatever positive momentum the parties have established, and then injecting a countermomentum that undermines the ability and willingness of both parties to continue.

Consider the following three cases highlighted in *Negotiating Under Fire*: the February 1994 Hebron massacre by Baruch Goldstein, the November 1994 kidnapping and murder of Israeli soldier and dual U.S. citizen Nachshon Wachsman, and the February/March 1996 string of terrorist attacks in Israel.

After the signing of the Declaration of Principles in 1993, Israeli and Palestinian negotiations began to gain momentum. The progress was halted abruptly when Baruch Goldstein, an Israeli citizen, shot and killed more than thirty Palestinians at the Cave of the Patriarchs (Ibrahimi mosque) in Hebron. It wasn't until August 1994 that the peace process was back on track.

In October 1994, the process was disrupted yet again, this time by Hamas's abduction of an Israeli soldier, Nachshon Wachsman. Although Israeli and the Palestinian security services worked together to locate Wachsman -- a notable development itself -- he was killed in the subsequent rescue attempt.

Terrorism continued to plague the peace process through 1995 and 1996, including numerous Palestinian strikes on Israeli targets, as well as attacks by Israeli extremists -- such as the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by Yigal Amir -- who were determined to stop the peace process.

It is clear that terrorist attacks have a major impact on peace processes. Leaders find themselves unable or unwilling to pursue a peace policy after violent events have cut into their public support and approval, their authority as negotiators, and the perceived credibility of the other party. The early-1996 suicide bombings in Israel illustrate this vicious cycle. Because of the credibility gaps that existed prior to the crisis, each side viewed the string of bombings as a direct result of the other's intransigence, further undermining each side's credibility in the eyes of the other.

Terrorist attacks are going to occur, and the parties concerned may have serious political constraints on their

willingness and ability to crack down on domestic extremists. Therefore, a considered strategy is needed: namely, the preemptive insulation of the negotiating process through prior agreement on a crisis-response mechanism. This mechanism should include negotiating what types of action would be taken in response to various crises, developing communication channels at both the political and the working levels, and establishing intelligence coordination mechanisms that will withstand the initial shock of the crisis. Having anticipated such crises, the parties are then able to create guidelines for an effective crisis response that will not only manage the crisis, but also encourage the resumption of negotiations.

### **Ghaith al-Omari**

In the coming months, the three major players in the peace process -- the United States, Israel, and the PA -- will be undergoing major transitions in administration. In light of this, preserving the peace process and creating stabilizing anchors become essential. It is far easier to revive a dormant process than it is to recreate a collapsed one. The focus of the peace process should shift from trying to conclude a deal to improving the situation on the ground, both in terms of economics and security.

In addition to security sector reform, U.S. training of Palestinian security services needs to extend beyond operational capacity to intelligence capacity in order to create effective Palestinian institutions. The security cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis also needs to be developed; this cooperation, however, needs the aid of a third party. In addition, security and political channels of communication should be insulated for the coming period in order to create a crisis response mechanism to ensure cooperation in the wake of a crisis. Finally, economic development is essential to stabilizing the West Bank and the continuing negotiations. Without such development, PA rule of the West Bank is at risk.

### **Dennis Ross**

The creation and expansion of political space is key to future Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Each side needs to consider the political needs of the other; if not, each undercuts the other's ability to take difficult steps. In addition, when one side takes a positive step, the other party should publicly recognize that fact in order to demonstrate movement and to help build political space.

For the future of these negotiations, there needs to be improvement on five levels. The first level is psychological, in that both sides need to take positive steps that the other would notice. The next level is economic: while some macroeconomic indicators show that life has improved in the West Bank, unemployment figures have not. In order to affect the Palestinian population, jobs need to be created and salaries need to be paid. The third level relates to security. While current efforts have been limited and a conceptual divide still exists, a joint approach to security and a solidification of Palestinian central command are necessary. The fourth level involves the Arab world. The Arabs must be ready to supply political cover for the PA and incentives for Israel. Last is the political negotiating process, which needs to be credible and have realistic objectives. Since the process should anticipate future violence, mechanisms should be developed in advance to cope with the crises.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Becca Wasser.*

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