

Mahmoud Abbas – Obstacle to Peace

[Israel](#), the [United States](#) and most of the international community were pleased when [Mahmoud Abbas](#) was [elected](#) in 2005 as President of the [Palestinian Authority \(PA\)](#). Expectations were high that [Abbas](#) would radically alter the policies of his predecessor, consolidate his power, reform the [PA](#), and put an end to years of senseless violence that had [claimed many innocent lives](#) on both sides and had left Palestinians with a feeling of hopelessness.

Abbas, however, has done little since then to deserve the faith the international community placed in him.

Rather than taking tangible steps toward peace, [Abbas](#) has done nothing but bypass and evade bilateral negotiations with Israel while incessantly repeating the longstanding irredentist demands of the [PLO](#). Moreover, Abbas' insistence that Israeli intransigence - not Palestinian - has stalled the peace process, displays an incredibly narrow and hazy grasp on recent history. Abbas's power, prestige and popularity have dramatically weakened over the years, both internationally and amongst the Palestinian people, and the evidence is overwhelming that he is the biggest obstacle to making peace with [Israel](#).

Abbas's refusal in both January 2012 and October 2011 to discuss tangible peace initiatives with Israel through talks facilitated by Jordanian [King Abdullah](#) and the [Mideast Quartet](#) - a grouping of [Russia](#), the EU, US and [UN](#) - barely made news headlines. Likewise, his requirement that Israel meet a set of strict preconditions before negotiations - including a [settlement](#) construction freeze, acceptance of a [Palestinian state](#) based on [pre-1967 lines](#), and the release of Palestinian prisoners not included in the [Gilad Shalit exchange deal](#) - was also mostly excused by an international media all too quick to make excuses for the Palestinian leader.

These recent refusals are far from the first times that the Abbas government has responded to Israeli [peace initiatives](#) with blank stares and impossible demands. In fact, they reflect a longstanding trend of evading negotiations that Abbas has maintained from his predecessor [Yasser Arafat](#). Despite at least three successive Israeli administrations voicing support for compromise, Abbas has shown no willingness to meet [Israel](#) halfway.

In 2005, when Israeli PM [Ariel Sharon](#) ordered the [evacuation](#) of all Israeli civilian and military personnel from the [Gaza Strip](#), [Abbas](#) had an opportunity to announce that he would support the “end of occupation” and would begin to build the infrastructure of a state. Instead, he emphatically opposed the withdrawal, preferring “occupation” to a position where Palestinians could actually enjoy independence. [Abbas](#), however, was given the benefit of the doubt by external analysts because of his relatively moderate tone.

Abbas wasted yet another golden opportunity for peace in 2008. That year, Israeli PM [Ehud Olmert](#) made an offer for peace so overt that US Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) called it "amazing" and warned that "[Yitzhak Rabin](#) had been killed for offering far less." Olmert's offer called for Israeli withdrawal from approximately 94% of the [West Bank](#), the creation of a passage from the [West Bank](#) to [Gaza](#), and the equal "swapping" of land so that [Israel](#) could annex its major settlement blocs. Olmert even proposed to divide [Jerusalem](#) and absorb a few thousand [Palestinian refugees](#). [Abbas](#), though, refused to consummate the deal. As Israeli daily *Haaretz* noted, "aficionados of the Palestinians again found a million and one reasons why the peace-loving Palestinian leader had refused the offer."

In 2009, [Abbas](#) again refused to negotiate, this time with new [Israeli](#) Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), and rejected the Israeli leader's offer to immediately resume talks without preconditions. Perfidiously playing the game of diplomacy, Abbas's chief negotiator [Saeb Erekat](#) called on the Arab countries to suspend the [Arab peace initiative](#) and called on the international community to isolate [Netanyahu](#) for "sabotaging" the [peace process](#). [Abbas](#), meanwhile, said he hoped the [Obama Administration](#) would force [Netanyahu](#) out of office and declared his willingness to wait years until that happened.

In 2010, [Abbas](#) made clear that he refused to even sit in the same room with the Israelis and the [Obama administration](#) had to levy all of its political power just to pressure the Palestinians into "proximity talks" with U.S. special envoy [George Mitchell](#). Not surprisingly, these talks yielded little progress. Abbas's senior aide, Tayeb Abdel Rahim, said that Israel's request to launch direct negotiations was "unacceptable." Even after [Israel](#) placed a [ten-month moratorium](#) on settlement construction in the West Bank, [Abbas](#) refused to sit with the Israeli leaders.

In 2011, [Abbas](#) finally took tangible steps in the peace process - only in the wrong direction. His political party, [Fatah](#), declared war on normalization with [Israel](#) and discounted peace talks as useless. Later, [Abbas](#) agreed to a reconciliation agreement with [Hamas](#) despite the fact that it is an internationally recognized terrorist organization and vows to never negotiate with [Israel](#). And, in September, [Abbas](#) tried to completely bypass negotiations once and for all, with the tacit support of the international community, by [officially requesting](#) that the [United Nations](#) recognize the independence of a [unilaterally declared Palestinian state](#).

[Mahmoud Abbas](#) has consistently refused to negotiate a deal now with three different Israeli prime ministers and there is no reason to expect that a change in Israeli leadership would make him any less intransigent. [Abbas](#) has proven time and again that he is either incapable or unwilling to deliver on any agreement, yet despite this fact, [Israel](#) has repeatedly been asked by external actors to make gestures to the Palestinians.

Not surprisingly, no offer has ever been sufficient. If [Israel](#) releases prisoners, it is not enough; if [Israel](#) agrees to withdraw troops or dismantle checkpoints, it makes no impression on [Abbas](#).

The [United States](#) and the international community continue to place all their faith in a man whose track record suggests that he will remain the principal obstacle to any progress in the [peace process](#). Rather than continuing to pressure [Israel](#) to make concessions, it is past time to look and work for a Palestinian leader who will respect not only the hopes of [Israel](#) but the wishes of his own people, the majority of whom would prefer to live in peace rather than continue to pursue a futile and endless strategy of "resistance."

Sources: [Washington Post](#) (May 29, 2009); [Jerusalem Post](#) (June 14, 2009); [Jerusalem Post](#) (July 13, 2009); [Jerusalem Post](#) (June 8, 2010); [Jerusalem Post](#) (January 29, 2012); [Washington Times](#) (October 25, 2011); [Haaretz](#) (October 26, 2011); [Haaretz](#) (October 27, 2011); [Jerusalem Post](#) (December 16, 2011); [Jerusalem Post](#) (December 17, 2011); [Haaretz](#) (December 19, 2011); [Israel Hayom](#) (January 2, 2012).