

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

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## THE LONDON MEETING ON SUPPORTING THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

**Mark A. Heller**  
**Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies**

The one-day meeting held in London on March 1 to mobilize global support for the Palestinian Authority was a fallback position for the participants, many of whom would have much preferred a full-blown international conference to make peace between Israel and the Palestinians. But when British Prime Minister Tony Blair traveled to Washington immediately after the reelection of George W. Bush in November, it was made clear to him that the American administration opposed such an ambitious venture as long as the conditions were not yet ripe. Absent American endorsement, not to speak of Israeli willingness to take part, a peace conference was totally impractical.

Instead, the idea of a meeting to support the operations of Palestinian Authority institutions was embraced as the next best thing because it promised to give most of the interested parties almost as much of what mattered to them most – a chance to be seen to be doing something constructive. The London Meeting provided a vehicle to respond to the post-Iraq demands on the United States by Arabs and Europeans to be more proactive on the Palestinian issue, to the post-Iraq demands on Tony Blair by his own constituents to demonstrate some evidence of the influence he ostensibly gained by promoting a “special relationship” with Bush, to the demands on UN, European Union, and Arab leaders to

show their continuing relevance in the international arena, and to the demands on the post-Arafat Palestinian leadership to reap some concrete rewards for the policy shifts it has initiated.

In this sense, at least, the London Meeting was a resounding success. The forum provided an opportunity to establish some sense of continuity with all previous international interventions by grounding its action in those interventions; the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions, President Bush’s various vision statements, the Arab League initiative of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, and of course, the Roadmap were all cited approvingly (as the London Meeting will undoubtedly be cited at the next international event). And it specifically tasked all the outside parties currently involved – the Quartet, the European Commission, the World Bank, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, and the Task Force on Palestinian Reform – with new responsibilities in order to reaffirm their essential role in the future.

But beyond the theatrics, the London Meeting was also significant in a more important, conceptual sense – because it enshrined the principle, advocated until now only by the United States and Israel, that establishing the institutional viability of a Palestinian state is a precondition for establishing its territorial viability. As Blair, himself, explained in an

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interview during the meeting, the only basis upon which peace based on a Palestinian state can be taken forward is the existence of "institutional and structural ballast" for the Palestinian state, i.e., "a sustainable democracy, the political institutions to go along with it, proper security structure and proper economic institutions."

In this sense, the London Meeting represents a commitment by the international community to help reinforce reforms in the areas of governance, the security sector and economic development to which the Palestinian Authority has dedicated itself, on the clear understanding that implementation of these reforms is a necessary stage in any evolution of the peace process beyond the Israeli disengagement from Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank. It is true that the PA did not explicitly respond in London to Israel's demand that it act to dismantle the infrastructure of terrorist organizations (and the "international community" did not explicitly ratify the Israeli demand). But even on this issue, the PA's declaration on institutional renewal stipulated that security sector reform "is intended to create the conditions conducive to the peace process with the immediate objective of ... preventing violence." In short, the London Meeting produced, not just the right words, but also something approximating an action plan, including the promise of expertise, training, technical assistance, and financial support reportedly amounting to somewhere between \$500 million and \$1.2 billion (above and beyond the \$1 billion already given to the PA over the past four years). However, neither the words nor the action plan necessarily guarantees the kind of virtuous circle for which the London Meeting conveners hope.

On the one hand, the Meeting did not begin with *tabula rasa* but was timed (perhaps fortuitously) to entrench existing domestic Palestinian trends, most of which point to a rejection of politics and policy as practiced under Yasir Arafat. Relatively free and fair elections had already

resulted in the election of Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), who had consistently repudiated the "armed *intifada*" and denounced terrorist attacks against Israelis. And the Palestinian Legislative Council had suddenly asserted some independence from the executive branch and twice rejected proposed Cabinets made up largely of former Arafat cronies. These events reflect a growing public demand both for greater democratization and for a reassessment at least of Palestinian tactics and strategy, if not of ultimate aspirations, vis-à-vis Israel.

On the other hand, the magnitude of the obstacles to successful implementation was illustrated by the suicide bombing in Tel Aviv three days before the London Meeting and, even more graphically, by the experience of the newly-appointed Palestinian Interior Minister, Gen. Nasir Yousef. On the very day the London Meeting convened, Yousef went to Jenin without coordinating in advance with the local leader of the Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, Zacharia Zubeideh, and was greeted with a volley of gunshots which wounded several of his aides. Yousef's immediate response was to order the arrest of "these criminals," but he quickly found himself obliged instead to meet them and work out some *modus vivendi*.

Consolidating its own power, functioning more effectively, carrying out the political and policy reforms it has undertaken to adopt, and, most critically, repressing the terrorists are all primarily acts of political will by the PA. In the past, the PA lacked the political will, and international technical and financial assistance, though readily available, could not serve as a substitute. If the PA now does demonstrate that will, then the support pledged by the London Meeting can be a significant supplement. But if it doesn't, the London Meeting will quickly become yet another footnote in the chronicle of futile international interventions in the conflict.

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