

Baby Steps

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

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Articles & Testimony

To: President George W. Bush From: Dennis Ross Subject: This week's visit with the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority

Mr. President, no doubt you have received many briefings on this topic, but having negotiated with everybody you will be seeing this week and having just returned from the area, I would like to convey a few impressions that I hope will be of use to you.

First, it is good that you are going and are committed to trying to achieve a peace agreement before the end of your term. Seven years without a peace process has taken a toll on the psyches and expectations of Israelis and Palestinians alike. Cynicism is high, and the belief in peacemaking is very low. Annapolis, while promising a new beginning, was greeted by Israeli and Palestinian publics with profound skepticism. They have seen words and declarations before. They need to see something tangible if they are to believe again in the promise of peace.

Second, the expectations for your trip are not high; that's fine, but should not be used as an excuse to do nothing. Already the two sides are falling into a familiar pattern of using their negotiating forum to complain about the failings of the other, not to engage in problem-solving. If nothing else, your trip might be used to focus on a series of small-bore initiatives so some early signs of progress might become possible.

Third, the best thing you have going is that the two leaders -- Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas -- have developed a real chemistry between them. The worst thing is that they are both relatively weak politically. In my experience, weak leaders don't typically take on history and mythology. And, yet, when you are asking them to resolve Jerusalem, refugees, borders, and security -- the core issues of the conflict, the issues that go to the heart of self-definition and identity -- that is precisely what you are asking them to do.

Maybe they will do so anyway. They certainly have good intentions -- but I worry about their capabilities. At Annapolis, the joint understanding you read avoided anything controversial since neither side wanted to be seen as conceding anything. The purpose of Annapolis was to launch negotiations, and right now those negotiations don't even have an agreed set of principles guiding them. So the question becomes: How can you persuade the leaders to overcome the fears that have constrained them from making the concessions you've asked for up to this point -- concessions, I might add, which if a permanent status agreement is to be reached this year, would be the hardest any

Israeli or Palestinian leader has ever had to make?

My answer would be that the public context must change. Both the Israeli and Palestinian publics have to be willing to take a second look at peacemaking. Today, their doubts overwhelm their hopes. A majority of Israelis and Palestinians say they believe in a two-state solution, and in almost equal numbers, they say they don't believe it will ever be achieved -- not, by the way, because of their own unwillingness, but because of what they perceive as the inability or ill will of their neighbor.

Israelis say, "We left Lebanon, and look what happened. We left Gaza and Hamas took over. Not for a single day has rocket fire ceased. Why wouldn't the same thing happen in the West Bank, leaving our entire population vulnerable?" Palestinians say, "Israelis build settlements in what should be our state and restrict our movement. If we can't go from Nablus to Jenin, why should we think we will get any of Jerusalem as our capital?"

I don't say this to argue against the effort. I support it. But I hope you will see that it is not enough simply to launch a process. There has to be a strategy to guide it. And it won't come from saying that we will be the monitor and judge of each side fulfilling its obligations to the roadmap to peace. Not only are there no obligations understood the same way by the two sides -- meaning that there is no agreed basis upon which to judge whether a requirement has been fulfilled -- but also some of the obligations are simply beyond the capacity or instinct of either side to carry out. Palestinians today have neither the means nor the will to begin to dismantle terror infrastructure. Israelis will not withdraw to the security positions they had at the beginning of the intifada in the fall of 2000 -- they see their current integrated security system as preventing bombs from going off in Israel.

Exhortations won't produce a change in behavior either. Nor will whitewashing the obligations or explaining away non-performance. Instead, why not ask each side to take steps they are capable of taking and that could still be meaningful to the other side? For example, on the Israeli side, a meaningful freeze on settlement activity -- certainly in all areas close to Palestinian cities, towns, and villages -- is within Israeli political capabilities and would be recognized by Palestinians. On the Palestinian side, a sustained and public effort to stop incitement in the media, schools, and mosques, is something Palestinians could do and that the Israeli public would notice.

Since the security issues cannot be wished away and won't come from abstract plans, why not re-establish a joint Israeli-Palestinian security working group to develop a clear plan for dealing with Palestinian security responsibilities, like preventing terror and punishing those who would try to carry it out? The plan could be implemented incrementally, and if Palestinians were performing effectively on their agreed responsibilities, they would gain enhanced freedom of movement. Maybe such an approach could also restore the faith of the Israeli military in the readiness of Palestinians to assume security responsibilities, not just security slogans.

Mr. President, you may feel this is all very mundane and that you want to focus more on vision than on nuts and bolts. That's fine, but you won't get to a peace agreement if you don't restore the faith of the Israeli and Palestinian publics in peace-making. The conflict is so awash with cynicism and distrust that absent a specific, grind-it-out approach, I fear that the two leaders -- notwithstanding their obvious sincerity -- will be unable to take a historic leap. So, Mr. President, use your trip to ask each side to provide their own suggestions about what they can do that they think will be meaningful to the public of the other side. And ask them whether there are joint steps they can take on security. And, finally, ask them how they can be convinced to deal with the core issues of the conflict. By doing this, you can give the process you launched at Annapolis its best chance. It may, in fact, be your last one before the momentum you hoped to create is lost.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of **Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World**.

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