

What Went Wrong

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Nothing is more basic to statecraft than matching objectives and means. Sounds elementary, but it is not necessarily the norm in our foreign policy. Look at Iraq: It is the emblem of a policy that too often has been shaped by a mismatch between objectives and means. The administration's assessment was guided initially by the premise that when Saddam Hussein fell, everything would fall into place, not fall apart. The means we employed reflected that assumption. Now, with crisis brewing in Gaza and the West Bank, if we are to connect our purposes with the means we have or can mobilize with others, we must start with assessments that are rooted in reality, not wishful thinking.

The Bush administration is not alone in shaping its policies on erroneous assessments. During the Clinton administration, when I was the chief U.S. negotiator, I believed and acted on the premise that Yasser Arafat was ready to make peace with Israel. To be sure, Arafat had recognized Israel, renounced terror (at least rhetorically), and joined a negotiating process. None of these steps, however, proved that he was willing to compromise on the core issues of the conflict. Only after Camp David and the subsequent Clinton ideas did it become clear that while Arafat could live with a process, he could not make concessions on the existential issues of Jerusalem, refugees and borders. Could we have known this?

Yes. And it would have certainly been better for us to understand this before launching negotiations on these core issues. True, the Oslo process mandated talks on the permanent status issues at a certain point. But good statecraft should have led us to test Arafat (and his Israeli counterpart) on his readiness to compromise on these issues before trying to resolve them. The process of negotiating interim agreements was not a sufficient guide because none of the agreements were irreversible.

Instead, we should have asked Arafat and Ehud Barak to condition their publics for compromise by announcing simultaneously and repeatedly that neither side would get 100% of what it wanted on Jerusalem, refugees or borders. This would not only have conditioned their respective publics to what would be coming, but also prepared the leaders for what would be required of them. It would also have subjected both leaders to withering criticism from parts of their own constituencies -- and the readiness to weather such criticism would have been one of the best measures of their seriousness for tackling these core issues.

Had Arafat been unwilling to take such a step, as I believe we would have soon discovered, we could have adjusted our objective. Rather than trying to resolve issues like Jerusalem and refugees, we would have focused on expanding the scope of Palestinian independence from Israeli control, developing and investing in the Palestinian economy, and expanding the connections between the Israeli and Palestinian societies. In other words, we would have worked intensively to create the conditions for peace-making after Arafat left the scene.

Statecraft is often about working to transform current realities so what is not possible today becomes possible over time. Before you can change an unacceptable reality, you have to understand it in the first place.

The Bush administration would be wise to apply this lesson to its policy on the Arab-Israeli conflict now. Since January, the administration's objective has been to produce a "political horizon" between Israelis and Palestinians -- meaning an agreement (or plan) on the contours of a permanent status deal on Jerusalem, refugees and borders. The feasibility of such an objective needs to be reassessed now.

With two Palestinian regimes, one led by Fatah in the West Bank and one led by Hamas in Gaza, does it make sense to be defining what permanent status would look like? In such circumstances, is Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas going to be ready or able to embrace an existential compromise and give up the right of return for Palestinian refugees to Israel? Is that going to enhance his ability to compete with Hamas?

Similarly, given the political weakness of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, is this the time for him to accept compromise on Jerusalem? Would the Israeli public be willing even to contemplate such a compromise at a time when the Palestinian national identity is up for grabs? And if neither the Israelis nor Palestinians can make such compromises, who in the region will embrace the compromises on refugees or a demilitarized Palestinian state or Jerusalem that would be part of any credible political horizon -- particularly when they can see the horizon has no chance of being implemented any time soon?

Pushing for an objective that is demonstrably not achievable now is not going to enhance our already shaky position in the Middle East. This administration does not need one more far-reaching, transformational objective in the Middle East that would quickly be revealed as hollow. Instead, now is the time to redefine our objective. The issue now, the challenge now, is the competition between Fatah and Hamas. The very identity of the Palestinians is at stake. Will they have a national, secular agenda or an Islamist agenda? Will we see the conflict remain a national conflict or be transformed into a religious conflict? National conflicts, though obviously difficult to settle, can be resolved. Religious conflicts cannot.

Our focus now must be on increasing the chances that Fatah will win the competition. This does not mean that our actions or the actions of others should substitute for what Fatah must do for itself. On the contrary, Fatah must remake itself. It must transform its image as a corrupt faction serving only the interests of its senior officials. Talk of reform must be translated into action. Grassroots organization with a tangible commitment to delivering services must begin to define Fatah.

Having recently met with over 30 Palestinians, including the Shabiba -- the young Fatah activists in the West Bank cities -- I found the events in Gaza produced a wake-up call for at least the younger generation of Fatah. They understood well that if they did not remake Fatah and compete with Hamas at the grassroots level, Hamas could also take over the West Bank.

It is this reality that should shape our objective now. With that in mind, several steps make sense: First, work with the new Prime Minister, Salaam Fayyad, to develop a program for donors that will not just pay salaries, but also enhance effectiveness, organization and delivery of services at the local level for the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. The key is to build incentives for real reform within Fatah -- offering assistance immediately but tying aid to necessary changes. (This will actually strengthen the hands of Mr. Fayyad, who is likely to face resistance on

some of the transparency measures he favors.)

Second, coordinate with the Israelis on how they can make life easier for those in Fatah who are trying to do the right things. Clearly, this is not just about releasing withheld funds but also seeing what can be done to reconcile Israel's security concerns with the movement of people and commerce in the West Bank. The focal point for these discussions needs to be with the new Israeli defense minister. Regardless of good intentions to help Fatah, if easing movement leads to bombs going off in Israel, no such approach will be sustainable. Coordination with Fatah forces in the West Bank and perhaps also Jordan might lead to a sequenced approach to security -- opening up movement in certain areas as Palestinians demonstrate the capacity or are helped to perform on security.

Third, we must make a major effort to stop the flow of weapons into Gaza. Egypt can do much more to shut down the smuggling tunnels. If longer-range rockets go into Gaza and launch against more Israeli cities, Israel will do something about it. As life becomes worse in Gaza, Hamas may be tempted to divert attention away from their internal failings and onto the battle with Israel. The potential for a widening conflict should not be dismissed: Katyushas were fired from southern Lebanon on Sunday and could be an indication that Hezbollah and perhaps also Syria would favor opening a northern front if Israel goes into Gaza to destroy Hamas infrastructure.

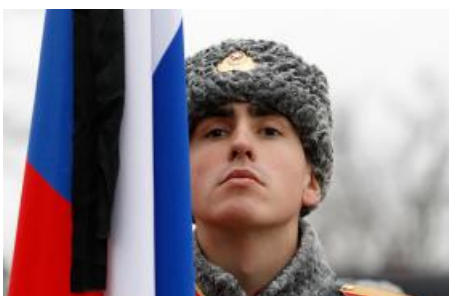
Fourth, Israel and the international community have leverage on Hamas in Gaza. Hamas is now governing there. The U.S. should insist that humanitarian assistance continues coming into Gaza, but Hamas should not get developmental aid if they are not going to be responsible. If Hamas seeks help from the outside, it should only get it if it is going to behave responsibly. Should we be pressing Israel to provide electricity to Gaza in an open-ended fashion if Hamas is going to fire rockets into Israel? The Bush administration needs to shape an international consensus on what assistance should be going and not going to Gaza if Hamas refuses to change its behavior.

Lastly, we need to forge a consensus with Arab leaders, especially the Saudis, on investing in the non-Hamas Palestinians. We need the West Bank to be a model of success to show Palestinians and others in the region that moderates deliver and Islamists do not. Ultimately, the stakes are very high and promise to affect not only the future of the Israelis and Palestinians but the region more generally.

Mr. Ross, now at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, was special Middle East coordinator in the Clinton administration. His new book is [Statecraft and How to Restore America's Standing in the World](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270) (Farrar Straus and Giroux). ❖

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