

Pretoria Calling

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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The Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, has a credibility problem that his visit with President Bush is unlikely to help: how to convince his people that violence against Israel will not lead to an independent Palestinian state. While Mr. Abbas must certainly show that he can deliver for his people, he needs help in discrediting Hamas and other terrorist groups. And one of the best sources for that help is not in Washington, Brussels or Riyadh, but in Pretoria. Indeed, South Africa's experience can provide valuable inspiration for the culture of peace that Mr. Abbas says he hopes to create.

Yasir Arafat loved to equate the Palestinian struggle for statehood with the struggle of South Africans against apartheid, but his was always a false analogy. In South Africa, less than 15 percent of the population controlled all the power and wealth and subjected the other 85 percent to a degrading, inhuman and segregated existence. For the oppressed majority, the answer was not one state for non-whites and one for whites; rather, the goal was justice and majority rule.

Compare that to the Palestinian movement for self-determination. Arabs today remain a minority in the area that encompasses Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. To be sure, given demographic trends, Jews will become a minority in that area within this decade, but even by 2050, Arabs would outnumber Jews by only 60 percent to 40 percent.

The international community supports a two-state solution because it recognizes that there are two national movements with populations in rough equality. That was never the case in South Africa. And while Palestinians have endured occupation and a denial of their rights, their commitment to violent struggle has sadly perpetuated this condition and stymied their national aspirations.

Why raise the South African comparison today? Because Palestinians respect the South African model but are not learning from it. For all of Arafat's comparisons to the African National Congress, it did not have an ideology of

violence: although the congress attacked the military and economic underpinnings of apartheid, it forswore attacks on civilians and generally expelled those members who violated that policy.

In contrast, no Palestine Liberation Organization member has ever been drummed out for violence against Israelis. As the price of joining the Oslo process, Arafat renounced terrorism, but he never delegitimized it; he never called those who carried out terrorist acts against Israeli enemies of the Palestinian cause.

I don't mean to idealize the African National Congress. But the Palestinians urgently need a credible and effective role model for assuming responsibility and rejecting violence. First, they must act in Gaza to prove that they can govern themselves and fulfill their responsibilities, including their security responsibilities. Second, they now have a leader, Mr. Abbas, who rejects violence but lacks Arafat's revolutionary authority and is being challenged by Hamas, which claims that Gaza vindicates the resort to terrorism. Arab leaders—who could have an impact—remain nowhere to be found.

The South Africans are far less reticent, especially in challenging those who call for violence, and they are likely to be taken seriously by the Palestinian public. I know from my conversations with members of South Africa's government in Pretoria this summer that they are interested in playing a role—an interest that they have signaled in several venues, including meetings with Palestinian and Israeli officials. Now is perhaps the time for a visit to Ramallah by Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's president, to share his country's experience and its lessons for the Palestinians.

No one can question whether South Africans struggled. No one can doubt the moral authority of their words. And no one can more forcefully offer a successful and nonviolent pathway to national liberation and a government of basic decency.

Dennis Ross, envoy to the Middle East in the Clinton administration, is counselor of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the author of *The Missing Peace*.



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