

U.S. Policy and the Middle East Peace Process, Post-Disengagement

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.



In-Depth Reports

On September 25, 2005, William Quandt and Dennis Ross addressed The Washington Institute's Weinberg Founders Conference. Dr. Quandt is the Edward R. Stettinius chair in the University of Virginia's Department of Politics. Previously, he served as a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and as a staff member on the National Security Council during the Carter administration. Ambassador Ross, the Institute's counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow, is a former U.S. Middle East peace envoy and author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (2004). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

William Quandt

Recent developments offer good reason for optimism regarding Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. First, violence has decreased over the past nine months, and while no one can be sure how long the quiet will last, it is a boon to Palestinians and Israelis alike. Second, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas is a far more credible partner than Yasser Arafat was. He has denounced violence and criticized those who resort to it, and he appears eager to return to peace negotiations. Third, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon is proving that he can both implement difficult decisions and complete his personal transformation from a man of war and occupation to a man of peace and coexistence. Fourth, while the American role has been modest in substance, recent statements and actions in Washington paint an intriguing picture of an administration that favors a two-state solution, supports a return to talks based on the 1949 armistice line, recognizes the need for a contiguous Palestinian state, and understands that Israel will hold on to some of its largest settlements in the West Bank. Finally, most Arab governments appear ready to support any move toward Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Although these shifts bode well for the resumption of negotiations, Sharon, Abbas, and President Bush each face significant domestic issues—the same sorts of issues that have often proven fatal to peacemaking in the Middle East. In Israel, Sharon may lose control of his party and run on a non-Likud ticket in the 2006 elections. Abbas faces longstanding Fatah corruption and growing Hamas popularity in the run-up to Palestinian legislative elections. And President Bush must deal with the fallout from his administration's response to Hurricane Katrina, continuing turmoil in Iraq, and his declining approval ratings. In addition, the wounds and mistrust generated by the intifada

remain prevalent among Israelis and Palestinians. The fact that both sides have adopted seemingly inflexible stances—Sharon’s hardline views on Jerusalem and settlement construction in the West Bank, and Abbas’s probable insistence that any future agreement grant the Palestinians nothing less than that offered by the so-called “Clinton Parameters”—is not improving the situation.

As Israelis and Palestinians attempt to sort out these domestic leadership issues in the months ahead, they will likely be inattentive to each other’s concerns and unable to implement truly productive proposals. Accordingly, Sharon, Abbas, and President Bush should agree to eschew both new public initiatives and provocative actions in the foreseeable future. At the same time, they should commit to discreet, serious discussions of final-status issues. Playing the role of mediator, Washington could steer such talks toward mutual concessions.

The United States should also assume responsibility for both mobilizing international support and proposing a Middle East Marshall Plan to accompany any peace agreement. This would draw all nations in the region into a constructive new dynamic compatible with the Bush administration’s goals for democracy and reform in the Arab world. It must be acknowledged, however, that these leaders are unlikely to take real risks for peace at the moment, and that some of the more optimistic ideas about regional progress are premature. For now, the United States must encourage a period of calm and permit each side to settle down and stabilize internally. Washington should also send a representative to communicate directly with Sharon and Abbas, eventually pressing both parties to take a more productive path toward peace.

Dennis Ross

Before exploring options for moving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict toward resolution, one must take a step back and fully understand three important developments. First, Yasser Arafat was alive and in power a year ago, meaning neither peace nor Palestinian societal change could move forward. He established a legacy of corruption and cronyism that deflated any optimism Palestinians felt about the future. Following his death, however, Abbas emerged as a moderate leader for the Palestinian Authority.

This leads to the second major development: the character and progress of Abbas’s tenure thus far. Abbas has worked to overcome Arafat’s legacy and denounce violence. He has also initiated a strategy of co-optation toward Hamas, believing that inclusion of these militants will force them to abide by the rule of law and abandon violence. At the same time, he assumed that he would be able to reform the defunct security services, rebuild the economy, provide jobs, and obtain greater freedom of movement for Palestinians. He has yet to deliver on these promises of reform, however, and his standing has diminished as a result.

The third development is Sharon’s ability to defy critics and pessimists and carry out his historic disengagement plan.

Despite these changes, one must keep in mind that each side is completely self-absorbed at the moment. Abbas is consumed by internal needs, and finding a way to reach out to Israel is the last thing on his mind. Likewise, Sharon is consumed by the necessity of placating the backbone of his party: the settlers, who were once his greatest supporters. He is not concerned with proposing new concessions or helping to improve Abbas’s credibility.

Accordingly, the United States must provide a bridge between the two sides. Although the Bush administration has made some improvements in its approach to the conflict since the beginning of its second term, its efforts have produced little. If the administration had given security envoy Lt. Gen. William Ward a clearer mandate, helped cement the ceasefire earlier in the year, or focused on providing security for Israel and access to the Palestinians, it could have generated greater hope for future agreements, as well as greater stability on the ground.

In order to redress these problems and help increase stability, Washington should implement the following recommendations:

- Work with the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and European Union to assist Abbas in rebuilding the economy. Successful economic and administrative development would in turn empower Palestinian moderates.
- Spearhead the effort to transform foreign aid pledges into reality. One of the best ways to accomplish this is by putting Palestinians back to work on construction projects. In particular, Palestinian workers could be paid to build their own homes, providing them with both meaningful employment and the opportunity to move away from the wretched conditions of the refugee camps.
- Promote a different approach to overhauling and professionalizing the Palestinian security services, establishing higher salaries and more direct communication between Abbas and his commanders. This would allow him to confront the pressing challenge of bringing law and order to the West Bank and Gaza.
- Define the third-party role. In general, this role should include two elements: an enforcement mechanism and an onsite dispute-resolution system.
- Reinforce the Quartet Roadmap to Israeli-Palestinian peace by formulating a clear vision and common understanding of each of its phases. This would help both Sharon and Abbas diffuse internal challenges from factions that accuse them of taking steps without any regard for their future impact.

Although these recommendations are not a panacea, they must be implemented with a sense of urgency if the situation is to improve. Otherwise, unilateralism—which produces outcomes, not solutions—may wind up defining the course of events. In such a case, peace would become a distant dream, and the current lack of faith that pervades each side would continue to define the region. In order to take advantage of the positive developments of the past year, we must act on these recommendations immediately or face the prospect of a bleak future.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Jonathan Powell.



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