

# An Opening in the Mideast

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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**P**resident Bush declared in Europe that the world cannot rest until there is peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Certainly he knew that Europeans would welcome such words. But I suspect this was less a tactical gesture to the Europeans and more a statement of intent, reflecting his commitment to act on what he sees as an opportunity for promoting peace.

With a mutually declared truce by the Israeli and Palestinian leaders, with the Israeli government confirming the decision to withdraw from Gaza and part of the West Bank, and with a new Palestinian leader and Cabinet committed to non-violence and internal reform, the president is right to see an opening. The critical question, of course, is what must be done to take advantage of the opening.

In the near term, the answer is produce calm — because little will be possible without it — and make sure Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas succeeds. Seems simple, but it will require great effort and, as Friday's bombing in Tel Aviv demonstrates, time is not our ally.

Abbas knows that the Palestinian public craves a return to normal life and supports the cease-fire that he has declared. His election gave him a mandate to reverse Yasser Arafat's legacy of chaos and violence. Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade understand this.

### Beneath the Truce

Notwithstanding the Tel Aviv bombing, these groups are likely to abide by the cease-fire for now. But before long, they will seize on Israeli settlement activity, dissatisfaction with prisoner releases or Israeli military operations in areas not designated for withdrawal to justify breaching the truce.

To raise the costs to Hamas, et al., of violating his pledge to stop all attacks, Abbas must demonstrate that non-violence is working and life is getting better. Practically, this means delivering quickly on increased employment and economic opportunities. Similarly, maximizing Palestinian freedom of movement is essential; the more extensive the lifting of Israeli checkpoints (and only an end to attacks will make this possible), the greater the benefit for Abbas.

Finally, as important as it is to improve the day-to-day reality for Palestinians, Abbas must also show that he can

produce a credible pathway toward achieving Palestinian political aspirations — or at least ensure that what matters to Palestinians can still be negotiated. That is why Abbas will emphasize re-activation of the internationally backed road map, a performance-based peace plan crafted in 2003.

#### The U.S. Role

None of this will happen by itself. So, if the Bush administration is to act on the president's commitment, what must it do?

- First, it must secure the cease-fire by removing ambiguities that could produce its unraveling. The new security coordinator, Lt. Gen. William Ward, must meet with both sides urgently and develop an understanding of the terms of the cease-fire and what is to be done in the event of a violation.
- Second, the administration must ensure that our assistance, and that of others, goes into labor-intensive projects that put Palestinians back to work and meet real needs. This week's international conference in London should be but one milestone in which donors identify tangible projects — i.e., massive housing construction — that will be financed quickly. It is essential for the Gulf oil states (which had over \$50 billion in windfall oil revenue because of rising prices last year) to underwrite such projects, and for the U.S. and the European Union to apply public pressure if they fail to do so.
- Third, the administration also needs to forge a common approach with the British, French and Germans on Iran, but not only on the nuclear issue. Iran is seeking economic benefits from the Europeans even as it subsidizes the Lebanon-based Hezbollah terrorist group, and even as Hezbollah is offering large payoffs to Palestinian factions to kill Israelis. If the Europeans are serious about promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace, they must raise the costs to Iran (and to Syria) of attempting to disrupt the truce.
- Fourth, Bush must get Arab leaders, at their upcoming summit, to explicitly endorse Abbas' commitment to end the violence. Arab leaders have never declared that violence is wrong and threatens the Palestinian cause. Such a declaration would strengthen Abbas' hand and raise the cost to Hamas and others of violating the cease-fire.
- Fifth, the administration must work with the Israelis and Palestinians to ensure coordination on the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and to define the meaning of their respective obligations on the road map. One lesson from the failed truce of 2003, when Abbas was prime minister, is that the cease-fire cannot be an end in itself. It must lead to peacemaking. This time, there must be a solid foundation for the effort. That means making the Gaza withdrawal work and forging a common understanding of the obligations each side has under the road map. Presently, both sides interpret their own obligations minimally and the other's maximally. If we are to create a bridge between the cease-fire and the future, we had better turn the road map — the only agreed political framework — into something other than a compilation of slogans.

For President Bush to seize the moment in the Middle East, his administration will have to work intensively with the Palestinians and Israelis, together and separately, and with Arab and European leaders to have calm prevail and to show that non-violence pays off.

Dennis Ross is counselor at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* and a former U.S. envoy to the Middle East under presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush. ❖

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