

Sharon, Abbas to Meet in Summit Talks

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

Feb 7, 2005

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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The following is a transcript from the NPR program Talk of the Nation.

JOE PALCA, host: This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Joe Palca in Washington, sitting in for Neal Conan.

Tomorrow, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and newly elected Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas will hold a summit in Egypt, a first step in resuscitating stalled Middle East peace talks. Talks broke down four years ago, but the death of Yasser Arafat in November and the election of Abbas last month have created a potential opening for both sides to find a way forward.

There already appears to be some movement. At tomorrow's summit, Israeli and Palestinian leaders expect to announce a cease-fire. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice invited Prime Minister Sharon and President Abbas to visit President Bush at the White House this spring. She also announced during her trip to the Middle East this weekend that the US will release \$40 million in aid to the Palestinians over the next few months, as well as appoint a US general who will serve as a security coordinator for the region.

Later in the program, we'll talk about the new proposed federal budget and its implications. But first, is this a new era in the Middle East conflict? If you have questions or comments about tomorrow's summit in Egypt, then join the conversation. Our number here in Washington is (800) 989-8255. That's (800) 989-TALK. Our e-mail address is totn@npr.org.

We start our discussion in Jerusalem with John Ward Anderson, bureau chief for The Washington Post. He joins us from his home in Jerusalem. Welcome.

Mr. JOHN WARD ANDERSON (The Washington Post): Hi, Joe.

PALCA: So what's the mood in Jerusalem tonight, if you can characterize the mood of a city?

Mr. ANDERSON: Well, I think, you know, there's a sense of heady optimism on both sides. People are talking about cease-fires and truces in a way that—and with such optimism that you really haven't heard during the four years that this conflict has gone on and killed, you know, 4,000 people. So I think all sides—I mean, there's a certain level of realism here, too; that, you know, what happens in the cease-fire and a lot of what goes on between the Israeli and the Palestinians are dictated by forces such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, who can send everything down the drain with one suicide bombing in Jerusalem. But, you know, everybody, you know, accepts that as a possibility, but nonetheless, you know, they've got a new leader in Mahmoud Abbas and a new willingness for the

Israelis to offer some concessions, and it looks like tomorrow down in Egypt, there may be some cease-fire declarations that are issued.

PALCA: Well, if there's optimism in Jerusalem and even heady optimism, as you say, is it possible to characterize the feelings on the other side in Ramallah?

Mr. ANDERSON: Well, I think that they're feeling very optimistic, at least about the cease-fire. You know, there are other issues at play here that they're worried about that go beyond security. Security is the main Israeli concern and, of course, rightfully so. They're the ones who have been victims of, you know, a serious campaign to blow their citizens up and their buses and their cafes. But I think what the Palestinians were hoping to see from the visit of Condoleezza Rice earlier today and what I don't think they felt that they got was a real commitment from the United States to hold the Israelis' feet to the fire and stop the expansion of settlements out in the West Bank and to dismantle settlement outposts as well, something that the Israelis committed to when they signed onto the road map. So although, you know, I think they're looking forward to a declaration of cease-fire, I think they're also worried that, you know, their main concerns have yet to be met, and until they are, there's always the possibility that these radical Islamic groups and Palestinian militants can sabotage the whole thing.

PALCA: Wasn't there a concern as well about, you know, the release of prisoners, that the Israelis offered to release 900 and the Palestinians—at least some in the Palestinian state—it's not a state yet, of course—some people in Ramallah were saying, 'Well, that's not nearly enough. There's 10 times that many in Israeli jails.'

Mr. ANDERSON: Yeah. And that's one of the real potential glitches here. It's not just that it's not enough. The problem is that oftentimes, what's happened in previous prisoners release is that rather than release Palestinians who had been arrested as part of the intifada, that the Israelis have basically gone through and cherry-picked people out and released Palestinians who were picked up for minor crimes or who were very rapidly approaching their release date anyway. The Palestinians want to see the release of some of the people—the Palestinians who have been in jail for more than 10 or 12 years since before the Oslo Accords.

And, you know, the other potential problem—and again, this is a serious issue—is that the Israelis initially said—and whether or not they're going to repeat this tomorrow, I don't know—but the Israelis initially said that they were not going to release any members of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, so you may have a cease-fire declaration called for by Mahmoud Abbas tomorrow, and it will be interesting to hear what Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the guys who are actually doing the fighting, most of the fighting—what they have to say, whether or not they're going to abide by a cease-fire if their own militants who are in Israeli jails are not among those who are going to be released.

PALCA: Right. I mean, if there's still this, you know, uncertainty and if there's still this, you know, huge it seems potential for things, you know, to break down quickly, how did the cease-fire come about in the first place? Is this—you know, who's pushing the hardest here?

Mr. ANDERSON: Well, I think there's no doubt that this was the prime campaign platform for Mahmoud Abbas, who was recently elected the new president of the Palestinian Authority. His whole campaign was geared around the idea of ending the militarization of the intifada, of ending the Palestinian violence against Israelis. And in order to be able to deliver that, he's been in serious negotiations with militant groups down in Gaza to try and get them to sign on to a cease-fire. And he's really the one who, you know, has been pushing the militant groups, on the one hand, to agree to stop attacks against Israelis and, on the other hand, he's been pushing the Israelis to try and offer up some gestures that will sweeten the pot and get the militants to do this. I mean, I don't want to say it's been entirely a one-man show, but there's absolutely no doubt that he has been the driving force behind the talks of the cease-fire.

PALCA: So, I mean, let's say the cease-fire is put in place and that it holds for a period of time, without specifying exactly how long, how would that affect day-to-day life in the region? I mean, is the violence so pervasive that you

can't, you know, go about your business there or is it less of a problem? Because I get the feeling every once a while—I've talked to people in Israel, who say, you know, that life kind of goes on, even in spite of some of the violence that's taken place. So would a cease-fire make that much of a difference?

Mr. ANDERSON: Well, a cease-fire would make a huge difference, obviously, if it led to a truce, but it also depends on—a permanent truce, but it also depends on what goes along with that cease-fire. On the Israeli side, I don't want to say it won't have an impact, but it will have a much less impact, because Israel has done a pretty good job of lowering the level of violence against it. They've built a security wall between the West Bank and Israel that's approaching competition. They've got a wall around Gaza. They've managed to kill most or many of the Palestinian militant leaders. And they've done a pretty good job of basically stopping the rash of suicide bombings.

The people who are going to feel the greatest impact are the Palestinians. If a truce and a cease-fire leads to greater economic development, you know, a loosening of the security around West Bank cities, the lifting of roadblocks and checkpoints, something like 700 barriers on various roads ranging from, you know, cement blocks to ditches to dirt berms throughout the West Bank, and those have completely stifled trade and the economy. And so if you can have a cease-fire that will allow the Israelis to pull back and lift some of these restrictions and the closures in the West Bank, and perhaps open the trade across the borders, that's going to have a huge, huge impact for the better for the Palestinians.

PALCA: Well, let's hear what our listeners have to say or how they think about the potential for this cease-fire and other changes in Israel and Palestine. Let's talk to Brad in Salt Lake City. Brad, welcome to the program.

BRAD (Caller): Thank you for taking my call. The first question that I have is these two gentlemen are going to get together, and assuming that they can come to some sort of middle ground, I mean, a cease-fire and even a truce is one thing, but actually coming to a long-term solution, it's clear it's going to require that both sides make concessions. And my question is, is to what degree are these two gentlemen able to make concessions on behalf of their people and to what degree do they have the political capital and political muscle to enforce the terms of the agreement that they come to? And the follow-up question to that is, you know, regarding the question of middle ground, does middle ground exist on the specific question of Jerusalem?

PALCA: Interesting. Brad, thanks for laying those questions out. What about that, John Ward Anderson?

Mr. ANDERSON: Well, look, I think these guys are capable of reaching some kind of decisions on the main issues that are hanging out there. You know, the tough thing is going to be for Abbas on a cease-fire. You know, like I said before, the question is whether or not he really does have the clout to enforce that with the Palestinian militant groups. But in terms of what they call the final status issues, the really big, tough nuts that have been so difficult to crack for a long time, both—certainly Sharon has the authority to act on behalf of his people, and Abbas was just recently elected with, you know, more than 60 percent of the vote.

So it's going to take a lot of education by these two leaders, if they actually reach these final status decisions, and this may be putting the cart before the horse, but it's going to take a lot of education on their parts to bring their people along with them. You know, Jerusalem is a tough nut to crack, but there have been creative ways that people have thought about how to give the Palestinians a share of the city and let them be able to declare that they have a capital in Jerusalem. Same thing with the borders, same thing with the so-called return of refugees. I mean, there have been a lot of creative solutions that are offered, and they're hanging out there and, you know, they were reached at Camp David and they were reached at Taba and, you know, it's possible to go back and do it again.

The really, really, really tough nut to crack right now is the question of settlement expansion and what's going to happen with the 240,000 Jewish settlers who are out in the West Bank. That's going to be a very, very tough issue to deal with.

PALCA: OK. John Ward Anderson, the Jerusalem bureau chief for The Washington Post, thanks very much for joining us.

Mr. ANDERSON: Thanks for having me.

PALCA: John Ward Anderson joined us from his home in Jerusalem. We're taking a brief break. When we return, more on the Middle East peace process and more of your calls. Our number is (800) 989-TALK. You can send us e-mail. The address is totn@npr.org.

I'm Joe Palca. It's TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

PALCA: This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Joe Palca in Washington.

We're talking about a potential opening for a move toward peace in the Middle East. Is the timing right? You're invited to join the discussion. Give us a call at (800) 989-TALK. Our e-mail address is totn@npr.org.

Joining us now from—are two experts on the Middle East peace process. Dennis Ross, former special Middle East coordinator under President Clinton and currently a counselor at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and Robert Malley, former special assistant for Arab-Israeli affairs under President Clinton and the director of the International Crisis Group's Middle East program.

Welcome back to both of you, gentlemen.

Mr. DENNIS ROSS (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy): Nice to be with you.

Mr. ROBERT MALLEY (International Crisis Group's Middle East Program): Good to be here.

PALCA: Thanks again for helping us to understand this very, well, complicated and—well, I'd like to be able to think that there's a day when we can stop talking about the prospects for peace in the Middle East and just talk about Middle East. But...

Mr. ROSS: We'd like that, too.

PALCA: ...maybe I can start with you, Robert Malley. I mean, what's your reaction to the news that Sharon and Abbas are expected to announce tomorrow about a cease-fire?

Mr. MALLEY: Well, I think it's both good news and expected news. I mean, it would not have been expected a few months ago, but at this point, given where both sides are, given that this is the one thing that their peoples expect the most, which is an end to the organized violence, which doesn't mean that there won't be continued acts of violence on both sides. I think we have to expect that. But that formally both sides are pledging to put an end to the organized violence that's occurred, that was one of the first commandments they were supposed to make under the road map that was adopted sometime ago, and I think it's good news for both sides, but now the hard part begins, which is to make sure that it's sustained on the ground.

PALCA: I mean, you mentioned that, you know, there will be violence even with a cease-fire in place. Have you any sense of how much is too much violence to actually derail the process?

Mr. MALLEY: Well, that's a good question, but a hard one to answer. Part of it has to do with whether each side believes the other one is doing enough to reduce the level of violence. If, for example, there's a terrorist attack and the Israelis are convinced that the Palestinians are doing all they can in general, they could absorb more violence than if they're convinced the Palestinians are not doing something and vice versa. So it really does depend on what's happening in the general context as opposed to a specific incident. But I think it's important to realize that even if things go well, there will be incentive for some groups to perpetrate acts of violence.

I think for Hamas, it's important for them to show that this is a cease-fire of choice, not of necessity, to use an

expression we ourselves have used in the context of Iraq. They want to show that they're entering into the cease-fire because they have chosen to do so, not because they were pressured or forced to do so, which means that every now and then, they are likely to try to test the limits of what can be done.

PALCA: Dennis Ross, how do you view this current cease-fire? I guess you have to have some optimism, but a lot, a little? How much?

Mr. ROSS: Well, I'm hopeful. I'm definitely hopeful. I think we have to understand it is a beginning. I also think it reflects a desire on the part of both sides, the Palestinians as well as Israelis, that they want to see an end to the violence, and they really want to see the resumption of a normal life. It's even more true for the Palestinians. I think, by the way, that adds to the Hamas impulse to show that they're prepared to go along with this. Rob made the point that they want to show this is actually something they've done out of choice, not out of necessity, but there's also a certain prohibition in their eyes about looking like they are taking on something that the Palestinian public doesn't want. Hamas sees itself as organically linked to the Palestinian public, and to the extent that which the Palestinian public would really like to see a resumption of a normal life, I think they take note of that.

So I'm hopeful. I think Rob's point about how much can be tolerated is right. The more the Israelis see that there's a genuine effort being made by the Palestinian security organizations to prevent attacks, the more this is likely to hold, even if there are incidents where you see attacks carried out or attempted. The key thing is going to be, is this being observed? Is it being carried out? Is Hamas using it as a respite to rebuild? Are there understandings between the two sides, if the Israelis pick up signs that Hamas is basically trying to rebuild itself so it can carry out attacks again, what do the Israelis do? What do the Israelis not do? What's understood between the two sides? I think there's a lot here that is hopeful and promising. I think there's probably also some areas where there remain important gaps in thinking, and those will have to be addressed if this isn't to fall apart.

PALCA: So what's—I mean, first of all, what's the next step, Dennis Ross, and how soon does the next step come if, as you say, people have to wait to see, first of all, if the truce holds or the cease-fire, and second of all, if it's not being used for one side or the other—well, I guess it would be the Hamas side—to rebuild its abilities to launch attacks?

Mr. ROSS: I think the next step is part of a much more basic issue right now, which is Abu Mazen, the president of the Palestinian Authority, has to show his way works. He has to show that there's payoff, there's consequence, there are results that life gets better. Today in the West Bank, 40 percent of the population is living under \$2 a day; in Gaza, 60 percent are living under \$2 a day. People have to see that there's a potential now, that you begin to see economic activity revived, that the potential for jobs is re-established. They have to see as well that there's freedom of movement. The reality is, it is not just some of the obstacles to movement, but the checkpoints. The Israelis have around a hundred checkpoints in the West Bank. They are going to get out of five cities as part of this agreement in the West Bank.

It's very important that, in fact, people begin to be able to move more freely. They'll feel that. When I was out there a few weeks go, I was speaking to somebody in Ramallah who lived 12 miles away from his brother in the West Bank who hadn't seen him in two years because of difficulty of getting there. Now the checkpoints aren't there because the Israelis want to impose collective punishment; although many Palestinians may feel that. They're there because those checkpoints and the building of the security barrier have actually prevented successful attacks of acts of terror in Israel. Now if, in fact, there aren't going to be attacks, then it becomes clear that the Israelis can do a lot, I think, to lift those checkpoints, stop the incursions into the cities, and if that's the case, Palestinians are going to be able to breathe again, and much more becomes possible.

To be sure, at some point, Abu Mazen has to show that not only can he improve the day-to-day reality for Palestinians, but his way works also in terms of offering genuine promise about the future in terms of political

aspirations. I don't believe you can take on those issues right now. I don't believe that Abu Mazen, or Sharon for that matter, are keen to deal with issues like Jerusalem, refugees and borders in the near term, but there has to be a sense that there's a pathway, and here, I would say activating the road map is important, and here, in terms of your question, there is a profound need to connect what's happening now with the obligations under the first phase.

The Israelis are supposed to dismantle all the unauthorized settler outposts that were established since March of 2001. They're also supposed to free settlement activity, including natural growth. The Palestinians are supposed to not just have a cease-fire; they're supposed to make arrests, they're supposed to collect illegal weapons, they're supposed to dismantle the terrorists' capability and infrastructure. Now my guess is that both sides will find it difficult to assume some of those responsibilities in phase one right now, but the next step really has to be working with both sides to reconcile what they're doing now and what those other obligations are and how and under what circumstances they can carry them out...

PALCA: Well...

Mr. ROSS: ...that can become part of activating the road map and showing there's a pathway there.

PALCA: I'd like to invite our listeners to join in this conversation. I'd also want to just remind people that in case you're confused, Abu Mazen is another name that people sometimes use to refer to President Mahmoud Abbas. I guess it's the more common way of referring to him if you know him well. But anyway, let's take a call from Paul in Honolulu. Paul, welcome to the program.

PAUL (Caller): Thank you very much. I must say that I am a skeptic about this whole thing, but I'd like to ask Mr. Ross and Mr. Malley, there was great optimism when President Clinton brought together the two sides and had a peace deal just about done, and then it fell apart. Since then, it seems like the conditions on the ground have gotten so much more difficult than they were at the beginning of the Clinton negotiations, especially the barrier, the fact that Palestinian workers—there are little or no Palestinian workers that can cross over to work in Israel. So what I'd like to ask the two gentlemen is how much—what is the difference right now on the ground compared to what it was before and during the Clinton negotiations? And do they think—how far back are we starting now than we were then? Thank you very much.

PALCA: Thanks, Paul. Robert Malley, what do you think about that?

Mr. MALLEY: Well, first, I'll make a comment that it's absolutely true that conditions have gotten worse. They've become much worse. But at the same time, the goals, what we're trying to achieve now, have become much lesser. In other words, people are not talking now about resolving the conflict and resolving the issues of Jerusalem or borders or settlements or refugees. They're talking about cease-fire. They're talking about going back to the very situation that existed before the uprising was even launched. So I think the caller's absolutely right that today, the conditions are worse, but again, what we're trying to achieve is not quite as much.

But to get to that point, to the second point, which is if, in fact, the parties were to negotiate the issues that they were negotiating at Camp David, how difficult would it be? I think there's a very important point there, which is that the conditions have become worse on the ground in terms of what's happening, for example, around Jerusalem, and there's been a lot of reporting about that today, in terms of what's happened throughout the settlements and also what's happening in people's minds on both sides, Palestinian and Israeli. So that in this paradoxical situation where there is greater (technical difficulties) probably than ever in history over the two-state solution. The US administration now formally endorses it. It wasn't the case before. The Israeli prime minister formally endorses it. It was not the case before. And the Palestinians continue to accept it, as does the rest of the international community.

But just as consensus is greatest, the conditions on the ground and in people's minds may not be as good as they were and, in fact, may be getting to the point where it's going to be harder and harder to build a viable two-state

solution, particularly if we don't move relatively quickly. So there is this paradox of people believing in it, but the conditions on the ground moving away from it.

PALCA: And let's take another call, this time from Al in Eugene, Oregon. Al, welcome to the program.

AL (Caller): Oh, thank you for taking my call. Yeah. I would like to ask your guests—but I'd like to make a comment. You know, we all, you know, like call—it's always like the Palestinian terrorism that is referred to as terrorism, but Israel, during the Oslo negotiation, had tripled the amount of settlers, has tripled the amount of settlements, confiscated more land and created this war which was created later...

PALCA: No, you make a good point. The language is sometimes slippery to use. But that point is a given, and I'd like to know what your question is.

AL: OK. Well, my question is, if Sharon already met with Bush last March, and he already outlined what's the outcome going to be, and because of the help of the Christian right in this country and with the support of the right-wing Jewish power here, I don't know how the Palestinians gonna get a viable state, even though Barak, who's supposed to offer them so good, which was in reality Barak himself said, 'I gave them nothing,' in a lecture he gave at a Tel Aviv university. Well, the media here keeps sugar coating what he did that. He did the right thing. Well, in reality, Barak himself didn't give them anything. I can't see where Sharon will give them anything either.

PALCA: OK, Al. Thanks for that call. Maybe, Dennis Ross, you could take a quick stab at that.

Mr. ROSS: Well, look, it seems to me that the—if—again, you need to know the facts. If one looks carefully at what Bush said to Sharon in his letter, the interpretation of the letter is actually vastly exaggerated over the actual terms of what's in the letter. For example, the two points that are in the letter are, one, take account of the population centers, which is a euphemism for settlement building in areas that are close to the Green Line. And yet, while it says you take account of that, the final agreement should be an agreement where the border has to be mutually accepted, which means that if there's gonna be changes in one direction, there'll also have to be some compensation with changes in another direction if it's gonna be mutually accepted, number one.

Number two, on the issue of refugees, all it says is that the Palestinian refugee issue should be settled through the creation of a Palestinian state, and that refugees—the Palestinian refugees should settle there rather than Israel. Well, that's just a statement of fact. Nobody that I know who is serious about believing in peace believes that Palestinian refugees ought to be settled in Israel rather than in their own state.

So what is said there doesn't preclude the issues that are important to the Palestinians still being resolved at the negotiating table. I think one of the things that administration could have done at the time was be talking with the Palestinians, and they didn't. One of the things they can do now is to make it clear that what is important to Palestinians, like the borders, like Jerusalem, like refugees, is still gonna have to be resolved at the negotiating table, and the fact is, nothing at this point that would deal with the aspiration of the Palestinians is some—can not also be addressed at the negotiating table. So I don't buy the assumption of the question there that somehow everything's already been decided because, in fact, it hasn't.

PALCA: We're talking about the issues involving the prospect for peace in the Middle East. We're taking your calls at (800) 989-8255. You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

Robert Malley, I wonder if you think, just in the current visit by Condoleezza Rice, she released this \$40 million worth of aid to Palestinians, she announced that there would be this general to oversee security issues, and then she said that both men would be invited to the—both the president, Abbas, and Prime Minister Sharon would be invited to the White House. How important is this? Is this a sign that the Bush administration is getting more involved, or are they still—need to get more involved to really have an impact?

Mr. MALLEY: Well, I haven't showered the administration with praise over the last four years, but I have to say that I think what they're doing now is more or less what needs to be done, which means focusing on helping the parties secure their cease-fire and making sure that you have a presence on the ground to monitor what are inevitably gonna be some of the misunderstandings. What happens if tomorrow a Palestinian shoots at a settlement in the West Bank? They will consider that to be an act of legitimate resistance, whereas the Israelis are gonna claim that it's terrorism. What happens if the Israelis believe that they have information that a Palestinian is about to mount an attack in Jerusalem and they intercept and kill the person before he or she has done anything? Is that within the confines of the cease-fire?

And the two sides are not gonna be able to write out definite understandings on that. It's too sensitive for them. So to have a third party there in the person of the security coordinator, General Ward, I think that's a good thing, as is the infusion of aid to the Palestinians, as is the support to the—Mahmoud Abbas. So I think they have understood, partly because they've had such a long time during which they didn't do that much on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, they've had a long time to think about what they would do when they did do it, and they're doing it. As I said, I find little to fault.

The real challenge won't come, I think, right now. I think it's gonna come down the line when the administration is gonna have to tackle the issues that it has really tried to avoid, whether it has to do with settlements or whether it has to do with the more critical final status issues that the previous questioner asked about. That's when we're really gonna have to see whether the administration is prepared to be engaged in the way that the situation demands it.

PALCA: All right, gentlemen. Well, I have a feeling we're gonna have to talk about this again sometime in the future because it's not an issue that's gonna go away any time soon. First I'd like to thank Robert Malley, director of the International Crisis Group, a Middle East program, for joining us.

Mr. MALLEY: Thank you.

PALCA: And also Dennis Ross joined us this segment. He's the author of "The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace."

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