

Mapping Out Peace in the Mideast

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/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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In my 20 years involved in Middle East diplomacy, there have been many times when the effort toward peace appeared futile to the parties involved. But none of those times had the ring of hopelessness that I see in the region today.

It is clear that Israelis, after two years of violence, believe they have no partner for peace among the Palestinians. For their part, Palestinians question whether the current Israeli government has any plan other than to try to extinguish their aspirations through force.

Neither side believes that any change is possible as long as Yasser Arafat remains leader of the Palestinians.

Israelis believe that Arafat legitimizes terror and has never reconciled himself to their existence. Palestinians understand that he offers nothing but tired slogans. But they part company on what to do about Arafat. Israelis want him out; Palestinians want him marginalized. Palestinian reformers, in particular, are leery of appearing as tools of the U.S. or Israel. They do not want to take on Arafat frontally; instead, their answer is to push for elections at the municipal and legislative levels.

The problem is compounded by the fact that they will not be able to hold these elections while the Israeli military occupies nearly every city in the West Bank -- and the Israelis will not withdraw the army if the result would be a new wave of suicide bombings.

Thus, if Palestinians won't act to stop terror against Israelis, then the military won't pull out, there won't be elections, there won't be reform, and Arafat will not be marginalized the way the reformers envision.

Left to their own devices, nothing between these antagonists will change. That alone is a powerful argument for a "road map" of sequential and reciprocal steps.

Last June, President Bush laid out a vision for a post-Oslo resolution of the conflict. The so-called quartet -- the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations -- has worked to develop a road map for moving from the current situation of conflict to Bush's two-state solution. Following the logic of Bush's speech, the road map is supposed to be built on performance.

Unfortunately, the road map that quartet members are presenting today is flawed, making performance unlikely and

the president's goals unachievable. The map has three basic failings.

First, it commits to the Palestinian strategic goals: End the occupation and accept an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state. But there is nothing comparable in the road map that responds to Israel's strategic goals. Israel needs not a cease-fire but a renunciation of violence that makes clear there is a legitimate and an illegitimate way to pursue the Palestinian cause.

At no time during the Oslo process were those who carried out acts of terror against Israelis ever treated as enemies of the cause by the Palestinian leadership. The road map, like Oslo before it, makes no effort to de-legitimize terror and violence. Until they are de-legitimized, those tactics will continue, and those in the Palestinian security services called on to make arrests will be seen as doing the quartet's or Israel's bidding.

Second, the road map spells out no real responsibilities of Arab countries.

Arab leaders would make it easier for Palestinian reformers to declare the illegitimacy of terror if they would join them in proclaiming that those who are not prepared to resolve all differences through peaceful means are enemies of the Palestinian cause.

In addition, Arab leaders could help Palestinian reformers by endorsing a Palestinian prime minister to hold executive power. Few steps would more profoundly signal that Arafat's time is past.

These would not be easy steps for Arab leaders to take. But certainly the Israelis are being asked immediately to take difficult steps -- dismantle settlement outposts erected since March 2001 and freeze all settlement activity.

And the U.S. is being asked to carry the burden of making sure that the road map is implemented. So when Arab leaders come to President Bush -- as they will after a war with Saddam Hussein, to challenge Bush to be as successful in peace as in war -- the president must be armed with a road map that requires Arab leaders to assume their responsibilities.

Finally, the road map now creates the illusion of specificity. Though it contains seven pages of reciprocal obligations, my experience with the parties tells me that they will interpret each point differently.

The Palestinians will have one definition for ending incitement, the Israelis another, the Europeans possibly a third. The same for an Israeli settlement freeze. The same for arrests that Palestinians are supposed to carry out.

Rather than providing criteria for evaluating performance by each side, each benchmark will itself become a focal point for debate -- and that will lead to one more dead-end in peacemaking.

The road map need not be a lost cause. But its strategic premise must be corrected, Arab leaders must do their part, and each benchmark must be defined with a common meaning. Then Bush's vision might finally have a mechanism to make it a reality. ❖

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