

Build Palestinian Hope, Build Israeli Confidence

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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President Bush, having concluded his consultations with Middle Eastern leaders, now appears poised to make a statement about what is necessary to create the path to peace. Bush has heard very different prescriptions for what is necessary. While the specifics on the Arab side may vary, the essence of what the president has heard from Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah of Jordan and President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt is that the Palestinians need hope. They need to know that the Israeli occupation will end, that there will be a Palestinian state and that there will be a specific timeline that spells out when this will happen. Only under such circumstances, they argue, will it be possible to get the Palestinians to stop the terror and violence.

From Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel, the president heard a very different message: The violence must stop first. Reform is necessary to bypass Yasser Arafat and to ensure that any halt to terrorism is not temporary; only then will a real political process be possible. To spell out the political outcome now based on far-reaching concessions by Israel will only confirm that violence works and terror pays -- a prescription for neither peace nor security.

Can Bush reconcile these two conflicting perspectives? Perhaps, but to do so he will have to build on the areas where there is already consensus, and he will have to be prepared to offer American ideas in those areas where no ideas now exist. In the first instance, there is general consensus on several points: There should be fundamental reform of the Palestinian Authority. The violence should stop. And peace ultimately will require two states -- Israel and Palestine -- living side by side with secure and recognized borders.

For the Arabs, the concept of a timeline with a credible end point is important. For the Israelis, the concept of performance, especially to prove that the Palestinians will fulfill their obligations, is their central preoccupation.

The obvious bridge between the two is a timeline based on performance. In practical terms that would integrate security obligations, reform requirements, confidence-building steps and political developments -- including statehood and negotiations with broad guidelines to resolve the issues of Jerusalem, borders and refugees.

This timeline would spell out what is required in the first six months (security, reform, mutual confidence-building); when the Palestinian state could be recognized (one year); and when even the most thorny issues should be resolved (three years).

But the developments on the timeline would not be automatic. A timeline based on performance means obligations must be fulfilled if the timeline is to unfold as designed. For the Palestinians that would mean that the clock stops if they do not fulfill their obligations. It would not resume until there was unequivocal performance.

In reality, that could mean the clock on the timeline would be stopped for a long period. On the other hand, if the Palestinians are performing and the Israelis are not, the clock as it relates to important political developments (e.g., statehood) for the Palestinians could be accelerated.

In presenting an integrated timeline based on performance, Bush would be responding to the interests and concerns expressed by both sides. But he cannot present this timeline without putting it in context. That context must take account of the importance of peace and the need to end the suffering of both sides. That context must also take account of how we arrived at this point. While some will counsel not dredging up the uncomfortable realities of the past, particularly as we try to look forward, no plan has any chance of working if it does not engage in truth-telling.

Whatever mistakes the Israelis have made in failing to be sufficiently sensitive to the Palestinian need for independence and freedom from Israeli control, the historical failing has been Arafat's.

He had an opportunity to end the conflict that he refused to seize. Worse, notwithstanding his commitment to renounce violence as part of the Oslo process, he continued to regard terror as an instrument of Palestinian policy.

That must end -- unmistakably, unequivocally and demonstrably. Both sides will have to adjust to reality. But Palestinians must be ready to acknowledge that terror and violence only destroy their cause, not serve it. They must be prepared to prove this in their actions. For a president who has made the war on terrorism the standard by which to judge himself, it is inconceivable that he would not require this to be the first step on the timeline of responsibilities.

I say this not simply because of Bush's credibility or Israeli needs but because any plan or any idea -- no matter how good -- could be overwhelmed by violence. In an atmosphere where the terror persists, the Israelis will continue their daily incursions into Palestinian cities and refugee camps to try to stop those who would kill Israelis. They will continue to tighten the grip on Palestinian towns and villages, making normal life, political processes and commerce impossible -- but also making it far harder for those planning, recruiting and organizing terror to carry out their murderous acts.

There may be no definitive Israeli military answer to Palestinian terrorism, but there will be no political answer to Palestinian aspirations without an end to the violence.

It is an illusion to believe there will be a peace process so long as the Palestinian Authority makes no effort to stop acts of terror. It is an illusion to think that reform is possible or meaningful in an environment in which terrorism remains legitimate for the Palestinian leadership.

And it is an illusion to think that a Palestinian state can emerge before the Palestinian leadership makes it clear that there will be only one authority; indeed, before it acts to demonstrate that multiple militias such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade--with their own agendas, their own weapons and their own capacity to attack Israelis -- will not be tolerated.

The Palestinians as a people need hope. They need to know that the pathway to achieving their aspirations exists, and they need to see that it is credible. But they also need to know that their state in waiting and their freedom from Israeli control cannot become reality until their leadership demonstrates its readiness to fulfill its responsibilities.

Without that fundamental prerequisite, no plan or timeline stands any chance of success. ❖

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