

# Don't Blame Bush:

## The Peace Process Was Already in Ashes

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



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**A** revisionist critique of the Bush administration's Middle East policy holds that blame for the current Palestinian-Israeli violence should be laid at the doorstep of a White House that invested too little, too late in the "peace process." Before this canard takes hold, let's set the record straight.

When President Bush came to office in January 2001, the Palestinian uprising against Israel was 4 months old, and the promise of the Camp David peace talks was a distant memory. The uprising already had morphed from a popular revolt to a full-scale guerrilla war. It was clear then that Yasser Arafat had violated the basic foundation on which the entire Oslo edifice was constructed: renouncing armed struggle.

Just two weeks later, almost two-thirds of Israeli voters ousted Ehud Barak as prime minister. Barak had lost his people's confidence by continuing diplomatic concessions in the midst of the intifada. New Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's mandate was to develop and implement a different strategy. He formed a unity government, arguing that with national unity Israel could prevail in even the most violent guerrilla contest. And he promised that Israel would not negotiate under fire. In this environment, the Bush administration concluded that circumstances were not ripe for a high-level effort to restart peace negotiations, and that the most urgent task was to prevent a regional war while fighting terrorism and weapons proliferation. Indeed, I co-chaired a bipartisan group of 52 members of Congress, scholars, diplomats and regional experts that made just such a recommendation.

While the events of Sept. 11 loom large over everything that has occurred in the Middle East since, the most underreported story since the start of the Palestinian uprising has been the fact that Washington's worst fear, regional war, has been averted. A menacing Arab street rising up in sympathy with the Palestinians and attacking pro-American regimes around the region -- a fear so real a year ago -- has not happened.

Arab states that utter so much sympathy for the Palestinian cause have done pitifully little for the Palestinian people. Indeed, the good news from Arafat's trying to smuggle armaments from Iran is that he had to resort to petitioning the ayatollahs because no Arab country would join in his crusade against Israel.

Despite this, the Bush administration still opted to pursue meaningful diplomacy. It endorsed a cease-fire recommended by former Sen. George J. Mitchell's Clinton-era fact-finding commission. It dispatched CIA Director

George J. Tenet, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and even Vice President Dick Cheney to offer Arafat political rehabilitation if he would meet the most meager conditions.

All these initiatives failed as the bombers continued to seek their place in a perverse heaven. The fault lies not with U.S. passivity, U.S. inactivity or the wrong level of U.S. engagement. The initiatives failed because while Israelis yearn for a cease-fire, Palestinians -- from Arafat to the nationalist or Islamist organizations that dispatch the bombers -- see the deliberate targeting of civilians as a legitimate tool to achieve political ends.

Early on, the Bush team recognized that diplomacy had exhausted its usefulness to Arafat when he learned that he too would have to make compromises to achieve peace. His turn to violence (first of the intifada variety, then of the suicide bomber type) was, for him, a logical move. But instead of cutting ties with Arafat for his complicity in terror, as Bush's father did in 1990, the administration has continued to hold out the promise of partnership should Arafat mend his ways. This failure to apply real political pressure on Arafat has forced Israel to seek security by applying military pressure on him.

It's not too late. The president should drop the pose that Arafat is redeemable. Instead, Washington should publicly differentiate between the Palestinian cause and the current Palestinian leadership and promise real assistance to achieve full statehood -- but only when the Palestinians have a leadership worthy of our help.

Without a common interest among Israelis and Palestinians in ending violence, no level of U.S. engagement can make it happen. ❖

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