

To End the Violence

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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We are witnessing a progressive deterioration in the Middle East. New thresholds of violence are regularly crossed. President Bush speaks of our efforts to try to bring the situation under control, but the security meetings we organize, the limited understandings we promote and the statements we make are quickly overwhelmed by events and outrages on the ground.

As the descent into communal violence between Israelis and Palestinians seems to take on a life of its own, many question whether anything can be done to stop it. Perhaps only attrition and exhaustion will do so. But before we assume that, we should at least consider whether there is an alter native.

One thing is clear: The current track will not work. Left largely to their own devices, Israelis and Palestinians cannot break out of the downward spiral of violent acts and military retaliation.

Knowing Chairman Yasser Arafat as I do, I am certain he will never initiate—only respond. But he won't respond to Sharon, lest it appear he was giving in. He could well respond to an American proposal that gives him something he can point to in the peace process and thus provides an explanation for the steps he would have to take to restore order and end the violence on his side. Barring a U.S. or international initiative that provides him a justification for ending the violence, he will let the situation deteriorate in the hope that eventually the international community will have to intervene and rescue him.

As for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, he wants to make a point: Violence doesn't pay and will not work. He refuses to resume political negotiations under the threat of violence, and so long as the violence continues he will exert military pressure on Arafat and the key security institutions underpinning the Palestinian Authority. Sharon has no interest in a third party "rescue," but could accept an initiative that did not reward Palestinian violence.

In such circumstances, the American administration is bound to come under increasing pressure to do something to transform the situation. It should do so only if it is prepared to insist on a new set of ground rules for our involvement and for any Israeli-Palestinian negotiating process as well. If there is one lesson to be learned from the Oslo process, it is that we can no longer accept one reality at the negotiating table and another on the street. Negotiations cannot work in an environment of violence and incitement. They cannot work when one side is promoting hostility and grievance, and the other feels free to take unilateral steps that feed that grievance. The new ground rules must create

a clear code for day-to-day behavior.

The past eight months of violence have destroyed any semblance of trust between the Israeli and Palestinian publics. Focusing on a solution to the conflict is out of the question in such an environment. Instead, the first objective must be to reestablish a basic bargain between the two sides: Israelis get security and a normal life; the Palestinians get an end to Israeli control of their lives.

Only when both publics begin to believe that the reality on the ground reflects the essence of that bargain will it again become possible to think about resolving the core issues of the conflict. But neither will believe that soon.

In the meantime, both stabilization and a political process must be pursued. Stabilization requires the Palestinians to fight terror unconditionally. Chairman Arafat used to say to us that he had a policy of "zero tolerance for terror." It needs to be restored and made irrevocable. Those who have committed acts of terror must be rearrested, and real courts should impose real sentences.

In addition, the violence has to stop; it is not a tool to be turned on or off. Independent Palestinian militias must be disbanded and disarmed—what kind of state permits such groups? Incitement in the media and the schools must end. The fostering of grievance must be replaced by conditioning for peace—including the acknowledgment that neither side can get 100 percent of what it wants.

The Israelis, too, have responsibilities in this new code of behavior. Their economic and military siege must end. There must be a moratorium on confiscation of property and demolition of houses. Check points should be phased out. And the outward expansion of settlements must stop. Just as Palestinians need to cease constantly promoting grievance, so should Israelis avoid acts that create grievance.

No political process at this point can deal with Jerusalem, refugees, or borders. In the near term—assuming there is an agreed code of behavior—the political process could address statehood, security arrangements and disengagement.

The problem at this point is not identifying a package that could respond to both sides' needs, practically and psychologically. The Egyptian-Jordanian proposal makes an effort to do that; the Mitchell Report has done so as well. The problem now is how to take a package of parallel steps and actions and turn it into an initiative.

The Bush administration could do that. It could go to both sides and propose a package, and attach a timeline to the particular steps within the package. It could establish a monitoring mechanism to see the steps are implemented. And it could put its own stamp on things by making it clear that if the package is accepted but commitments not carried out, we will publicly put the onus on the side that failed to act.

That, more than anything else, would establish the administration's seriousness about imposing ground rules. Too often in the past eight years, we have shied away from publicly pointing the finger at those not fulfilling their commitments. A new administration not wed to a process, and determined to learn the lessons of the past, should be prepared to make it clear that it is serious about creating a different environment, serious about re-establishing the core bargain for both sides, and serious about presenting an initiative to end the violence, the vulnerability, and the increasing numbers of victims.

Ambassador Dennis Ross is a distinguished fellow and counselor at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



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