

U.S. Mediation in the Peace Process: Context for the Ross Mission

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Return of U.S. Mediation: Less than four months after the standoff between the Clinton and Netanyahu administrations over the extent of Israel's further redeployment (FRD) from the West Bank, Special Middle East Coordinator Dennis Ross is back in the Middle East trying to "narrow the differences" between the Israeli and Palestinian positions. While the obstacles to progress remain steep, prospects for an agreement may, in fact, be brighter than any point in recent months. An analysis of recent events suggests that, just as they did in the weeks leading up to the January 1997 Hebron accords, Israeli and Palestinian leaders alike have been catering to public opinion and consolidating power to cushion the impact of an anticipated agreement on the FRD. Even though Ross's visit was punctuated by an IDF operation that left two Hamas commanders dead and led to promises of revenge by Hamas leaders, the current mission and corollary meetings to be held alongside the United Nations General Assembly later this month may yet produce positive results.

The Palestinian Landscape: After months of declaring his acceptance of the American proposals on the FRD and his readiness to sign a deal on those terms, Yasir Arafat has recently shored up his traditional base of support among key constituencies, reshuffled his cabinet, tamed the Palestine Legislative Council (PLC), reined-in the military, demonstrated his power, and indulged Palestinian public opinion.

Facing a vote of no-confidence in the PLC over a year-old corruption report, Arafat co-opted a number of the legislators threatening to vote against him and retained all but one of the ministers accused of corruption in a cabinet reshuffle that displayed his power and shocked the PLC.

> Indulging public opinion, Arafat took firm action against the Palestinian security services' rampant abuse of power by executing two Palestinian policemen convicted of killing two others in a family feud. As one of the murder victims was reportedly a senior official in Arafat's own Fatah faction, the executions also bolstered Arafat's standing within his core support group. By forcing his ministers to attend the executions, Arafat used the opportunity to make a clear and intimidating statement on the extent of his power and his ability to use it.

Arafat exercises firm control over his lieutenants by preventing anyone from accumulating too much power, by insisting they all report directly to him, and by routinely playing them off each other. It is likely, therefore, that

Arafat's decision to pass over his regular lead negotiators Abu Mazen (Mahmud Abbas) and Saeb Erakat when he appointed Abu Ala (Ahmed Qurie) to conduct negotiations over the FRD was to underscore his personal authority.

> In an effort to shore up his hardline credentials and prepare public opinion for a possible breakthrough in negotiations, Arafat declined in several recent interviews to condemn Palestinian attacks against Jews. Even before Ross arrived, Hamas leaders threatened that "relations between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority would witness more tension" should the current initiative succeed. This threat suggests that the Palestinian opposition feared the current push to conclude an agreement over the FRD could succeed.

The Israeli Landscape: Binyamin Netanyahu reestablished his credentials with his core constituency over the past few months by resisting U.S. pressure and by being perceived as resisting the FRD all along. Yet, reports of secret meetings with Palestinians, mounting domestic political pressures and extremist threats, and recent overtures to what is increasingly being termed the Israeli "soft right" indicate that Netanyahu is also setting the stage for an agreement on the FRD.

After the August 20th murder of an elderly Jew in the Tel Rumeida enclave in Hebron, Netanyahu promptly promised to replace the existing caravans there with permanent structures, citing not only security reasons but also the need to make a statement on the permanence of the Jewish presence in Hebron. Additionally, in what the Palestinian press said "could only be interpreted as an incentive to escalate tension," the Israeli Interior Ministry and the Jerusalem Municipality opened the door for the first Jewish families to move into buildings owned by Irving Moskowitz in Ras al-Amud.

> Rumors of secret meetings between Israeli and Palestinian officials on the island of Rhodes, of secret talks between Netanyahu and PLC speaker Abu Ala, and of draft agreements on the FRD passed to PA officials created an anxious stir throughout Netanyahu's coalition. The fact that Netanyahu met with Palestinian officials and tried -- unsuccessfully -- to keep most of his cabinet in the dark suggests that he really is seeking to close a deal on the FRD.

The extremist fringe also senses Netanyahu intends to close a deal. Aware of this, the Shin Bet opened a new department focusing solely on the activities of a Jewish underground suspected of planning attacks on Israelis, Palestinians, and The Temple Mount aimed at undermining the peace process.

> The Land of Israel faction in the Knesset and the settlers' Yesha Council continue to challenge Netanyahu on the issue of withdrawal, threatening to dissolve the Knesset and call early elections if it becomes clear that Netanyahu is about to sign a withdrawal agreement. In response, Netanyahu has threatened to call early elections himself if the coalition fails to support his initiative on the FRD.

Killing of Hamas Commanders: The deaths of Imad and Adel Awadallah in an IDF raid on a Hamas safe-house are unlikely to prevent at least measured progress on the FRD talks. The raid was not purposefully timed to coincide with Ross' visit; whether they heard gunshots coming from the area or received a tip on the brothers' location, the IDF quickly capitalized on a rare lucky break. Moreover, the PA's subdued public reaction to the raid, the fact that Jibril Rajoub's Preventive Security Apparatus was supposedly pursuing Adel even as the Israelis were searching for Imad, and the PA's own interest in seeing these fugitives apprehended suggests Arafat prefers securing a deal on the FRD to making an issue of the raid or the subsequent closure of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The Negotiating Environment: In May, at the time of the "London ultimatum," the Israeli-Palestinian peace process became a solely U.S.-Israeli drama in which the Palestinians were not active participants. Since then, the environment has changed. Today, Ross is in the Middle East to "nibble around the sides" of the outline of an agreement reached by the parties themselves through a series of high-level negotiations. The inclusion on the U.S. team of the State Department legal adviser who drafted the Hebron agreement suggests that the two sides are at, or near, the moment of decision.

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