

Dennis Ross

Searching for a Solution

by Michael Kaplan

As the stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict drags on, the Bush administration and the rest of the international community seem content to let the situation fester until a breakthrough can be reached. Meanwhile, with every day that passes, prospects for a ceasefire, let alone a lasting peace, become dimmer.

The conflicts causes and possible solutions remain steeped in controversy. While Israel's settlement policy is a primary factor preventing a breakthrough, there are still a range of questions about the past and future that remain unanswered. Among them: Is Yasir Arafat solely responsible for rejecting the peace process in 2000, or has he been unfairly labeled as a scapegoat for the failure of the negotiations? Can Israel provide for its own security before it negotiates a final peace treaty with the Palestinian Authority, specifically by building a security barrier?

Several of my questions were answered last month, when Ambassador Dennis Ross discussed his experiences as a former Middle East envoy for the Clinton administration, and cataloged a series of options for ending the conflict at the Dean's Forum Lecture here at New School University.

"In my judgment, Arafat is to blame," Ross announced, in reference to the failed negotiations at Taba Beach at the end of 2000. He rejected the terms of the accords on January 2, 2001, and has impeded attempts to reform the PA ever since.

Most recently, Arafat bested Prime Minister Ahmed Queria in a power struggle over control of the PA's security forces. His continued control virtually guarantees that the Palestinians will not crack down on terror any time soon. However, Israel is not without blame. In 2000, they were prepared to give up the entire Gaza Strip and 95%-97% of the West Bank. Since Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has taken office, that deal appears to be a relic of the past.

At the forum, Ross, the director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, meticulously laid out seven current options for ending the Intifada:

1) Muddled Down Approach:

According to Ross, this is the option that is currently being pursued. Under it, the international community will allow the Israelis and Palestinians to fight until they are exhausted enough to resume negotiations. Citing the fact that casualties on both sides were significantly lower during the beginning of the conflict, Ross believes that this policy will ultimately result in an unacceptable escalation of violence.

