

## **Ambassador Dennis Ross**

### **“Five Reasons for Hope and Five Recommendations for Success”**

**March 9, 2005**

Everywhere I go these days I get asked the same question: Are you optimistic? I always respond, “About what?” They say, you know, the Middle East, are you optimistic now?

So, I was thinking today about what I would say here, and I think I’m going to focus on the Israelis and the Palestinians and why there is a moment of possible opportunity now.

There are five reasons now to feel this is a moment to be hopeful about what’s going on between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The first and most important reason is Arafat is gone. Arafat was an impediment to change, not only between the Israelis and Palestinians, but among Palestinians as well. As long as Arafat was there, the potential for significant change, even internally, was nonexistent. The rule of law, of ending corruption, introducing institutionalization, elections, democracy, and transforming the Palestinian reality, were impossibilities. For him, holding power was the key, and anything that would restrain or limit his power was a threat to the Palestinian cause because he defined himself and the cause as one and the same. In terms of change with Israel, Arafat could reach limited deals. I negotiated a number of deals between Arafat and the Israelis, but the idea of ending the conflict wasn’t something he was going to do. He was not going to live without struggle and was not going to be able to end the conflict. That is why he couldn’t transform himself and why in the end, even though we put something on the table that was far reaching, he couldn’t accept it because of these words: ending the conflict. Ending the conflict meant he would have no more claims, no more grievances and no more struggles. He had to have claims and grievances. He couldn’t agree

to end the conflict. If something better came along, he just couldn't agree to something at this stage that would rule it out.

The second factor is we have a new Palestinian leader. Mahmoud Abbas, or Abu Mazen as I call him, is very different from Arafat. He doesn't believe in violence as a tool. Arafat has never given it up. He might have renounced it, but he never gave it up. He never delegitimized it. He treated violence as an acceptable legitimate tool. Abu Mazen believes violence is wrong and won't serve Palestinian interests. On the contrary, it was harmful to Palestinian interests. It hasn't benefited Palestinians. He also believes in reform. He believes in institutionalization. He believes in the rule of law, and in sharing power. That's one of the reasons that all of the Palestinian reformers have been strongly supportive of him. We have a new Palestinian leader who believes that the answer for the Palestinians is non-violence, who believes that they will never and should never sacrifice their rights. He is a committed nationalist, but he believes the way to achieve Palestinian rights and aspirations is through non-violence and negotiations.

The third factor is that Sharon has made the decision to withdraw from Gaza. It means that the leader who built the settlements and who encouraged the settlers to settle in them, is going to dismantle the settlements that he has helped build. He also made the decision to get out of four small settlements in the northern part of the West Bank. These small settlements only had 500 people, but the geographic area that Israel will leave in the West Bank when they leave these four settlements is twice the size of Gaza. It's not immaterial that it is only a small number of settlements in the West Bank, because it actually has relevance on the ground. Sharon having done this, did cost himself the government he had before, produced opposition from the right wing in Israel, lost the settler base that had always been his, faced opposition from within his party and formed a national unity government. Peres and the Labor Party are now in the cabinet and they are there to ensure that the withdrawal actually takes place. If the withdrawal wasn't going to take place, they'd have no reason to stay there. Whether they will stay in the government after the withdrawal, remains a big question. You're going to see Israel leave Gaza and not only that, but it is going to

dismantle 21 settlements that are there and establish an important precedent. When Sharon, the man who built the settlements, is the one who dismantles them, it will create significant new dynamics.

There is a fourth factor: Egypt is prepared to play a different role than before. Mubarak stopped playing an active role after a ceremony for a Declaration of Principles. The first implementing agreement was signed on May 4, 1994 in Cairo at a ceremony presided over by Mr. Mubarak. He had the U.S. Secretary of State, the Foreign Minister of Russia, the Israeli Prime Minister, Israeli Foreign Minister, Egyptian Foreign Minister and Arafat there. Fifteen minutes later, Arafat refused to sign the maps of the agreement. I went to his top negotiators and asked what was going on, and neither one had a clue. I went to Secretary Christopher and suggested that we go to Mubarak and get everyone off stage. Arafat was not going to concede in front of the world. Rabin said to Arafat as we got off the stage, "What's your problem?" To which Arafat replied, "Will you agree to discuss having Palestinian policemen on the bridge of Jericho and expanding the size of Jericho District?" Rabin responded, "I told you last night I would do that." Arafat asked him "Will you put it in writing?" Rabin answered, "If I told you I would do it, I will put in writing." What neither one knew was that at 2:30 a.m., I did put it in writing and they had signed it. Arafat put on the show because he was about to go to Gaza and he wanted to demonstrate before the Palestinians that no one could stand up for them as he did.

Arafat succeeded as a symbol and failed as a leader. As a symbol, all he had to do was to mobilize passions, to show his public that he would struggle for them. That's what all this was about. It didn't matter how it had embarrassed Mubarak, and it did. It had a negative impact on Mubarak who, from that point on, never played a significant role. He was not going to put himself in a position where Arafat could embarrass him. Today, if you fast forward, Egypt is playing a more helpful role, not just in terms of its relations with Israel but what it is prepared to do in Gaza to help the Palestinians. It's not an act of full selflessness. Gaza is Egypt's next door neighbor. When the Israelis are out, the last thing Egypt wants to see is for Gaza to evolve into chaos or become "Hamasland." From Egypt's standpoint, a clear threat comes from the Muslim Brotherhood and

Hamas is the Muslim Brotherhood. This creates an opening, because the Palestinians can use this help for the Israelis to get out of Gaza, including the Philadelphia Road, which is where there are smuggling tunnels from Sinai into Gaza. They need to see that Egypt is going to prevent the smuggling. Egypt's new role is important.

The fifth factor is the readiness on the part of the Bush Administration in its second term to engage in the process. They spent four years disengaged and walked away from this process. We didn't make peace, but prevented a war. Disengagement has been proven to be a failure. 1,100 Israelis died in the last 4 years and 3,600 Palestinians died during the same time. Multiply by factors of three and five, the numbers of maimed and wounded on each side, and the economic situation is catastrophic, particularly for the Palestinians. Disengagement didn't work. But the President after being elected has made it clear he's prepared to expend political capital to see a Palestinian state. Secretary of State Rice on her first trip outside the country, not only went to Europe, but went to see Sharon and Abu Mazen. She's already gone to London for a conference on the Palestinians and the President made it clear that we can't rest until we see this issue resolved. That indicates a level of intention that is different from the first term. How it gets translated into behavior is an important question.

Abu Mazen is the new leader. His intentions are different from Arafat's. He doesn't have Arafat's charisma and is not an icon for the Palestinian movement. Arafat was an icon. Like him or not, from a Palestinian perspective, he put the Palestinian cause on the map and got the world to accept the national aspirations of the Palestinian as being legitimate. For that he will always get credit among Palestinians. Abu Mazen does not have that. He has to find a way to build his authority. He has something going for him, which is the desire of the Palestinians in the territories to see an end to violence and to chaos, and to have normal life restored. He was elected on January 9<sup>th</sup> and the exit polls there are revealing. These are exit polls from Bir Zeit University: 84% of those who voted did that because they wanted to see an end to chaos and wanted to see good governance 81% of those who voted did so because they wanted to see economic life restored. Bear in mind that now 40% of the Palestinians living on the West

Bank and 60% in Gaza live on less than \$2.00 a day. It is not a major surprise that they wanted to see normal life restored. About 77% of those who voted said they wanted to see talks restored with the Israelis, because they knew you couldn't create normalcy unless you had that. Abu Mazen does not have much charisma, may not have the built-in authority, but he has a mandate to reverse the Arafatist legacy on chaos.

Abu Mazen does not have a real mandate to reverse Arafat's legacy about no compromise on Jerusalem, refugees and borders. He needs to focus on making life better and to deliver on that. He has a strategy of co-optation, not confrontation. Partly that's a function of not having the capability or believing he doesn't. The Palestinians do not want to fight each other and Abu Mazen reflects that. His attitude on not confronting but co-opting others reflects broader ethos among Palestinians. His strategy is to build political process. He wants Hamas to take part in these elections. He wants them to be bound by the rules of elections and become political actors, not violent actors. He wants elections of a new legislative council that will pass laws and create what will be a society governed by law. He needs time for all that. To have time, he has to show that his way works. He has to show that life gets better, people go back to work, the checkpoints get lifted and the Palestinians can breath and move.

When I was there two months ago, I was talking to a Palestinian in Ramallah. He hadn't seen his brother in two years; he lives 12 miles away. Every Palestinian will feel it if the Israelis lift the siege. Did the Israelis impose a siege because they were trying to inflict collective punishment on the Palestinians? The Palestinians would say yes and the Israelis would say, "We imposed a siege because if we didn't we would have had dead Israelis. Every time we lift the checkpoints, we have dead Israelis." If you look at suicide bombing attacks out of the West Bank into Israel, from the summer of 2001 until about a year ago, there were 84 successful suicide-bombing attacks in Israel. In the last year, they were down to seven. Why? Israel is building a security barrier where there's been no penetration. And because they've had a siege. But if the siege continues, nothing can change and Abu Mazen can't deliver. Abu Mazen represents a non-violent

approach. He has to show his way works. He has to build his authority by proving that his way works.

It's a race against time because Hamas and Islamic Jihad can read Abu Mazen's strategy just the way I described it to you. The essence of his strategy is to marginalize them, create a rule of law and a political process to marginalize them. If I can describe it, they can understand it. Will they give him the time to marginalize them? No. They will give him some time because they know the consensus of the Palestinians and don't want to look like as the ones who are frustrating what the Palestinians want. Abu Mazen has to deliver. Right now, he still got checkpoints out there. The Israelis are talking about getting out of two cities in the West Bank. In the case of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, they will give Abu Mazen a period of time, but soon they will begin to seize on excuses to justify ending the ceasefire. The Israelis do not see what the Palestinians are doing in response. The critical thing is that from the standpoint of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, over time they'll say, the Israelis are violating the ceasefire. Why? Because they're building settlements or are still building what they call the wall, or they're not releasing enough prisoners, or the areas where Israel has not withdrawn, there will be incidents between the IDF and these groups and they will say that we're justified in ending the ceasefire. That's why we're in a race against time. What is to be done? I have here five recommendations.

The first is that we have to secure the ceasefire. There's no common definition of the ceasefire. This is a ceasefire that each side defines in their own way. That can't work. It will unravel. One of the things that must be understood is what it is. What constitutes a violation? What happens if one takes place? What are the consequences? And what is the response? What is expected of the Palestinians and what is expected of Israel? We can secure the ceasefire by answering these questions. Secretary Rice appointed a security coordinator between the two parties. He should be out there working with both sides in a three-way process, not just meeting with them separately. He should bring them together. What he is going to find is that their answers are not the same. His responsibility is to make sure the gaps between them are overcome. His responsibility is to make sure the ceasefire is understood the same way and

responses to violations are understood the same way, that there is a mechanism for what to do, or coordination of what each of them will do. That has to happen before the violation, because when you have the problems that I see, if they don't respond the same way, there's going to be a sense of betrayal.

The second recommendation: Abu Mazen has to deliver the goods. Life has to get better, projects have to materialize now, and donor efforts that have been produced can't materialize 18 months from now. Eighteen months from now, it will be late, and one year from now will be too late. We have six to nine months. What we have to do is focus on projects that put Palestinians back to work and meet real needs. I have a suggestion as to what kind of projects should be built: housing. Housing used to make up the backbone of Israeli construction industry. They can build houses and they need houses. The Israelis are withdrawing from settlements. Everywhere where Israelis withdraw, there ought to be a program of what will be done on the ground for Palestinians. Housing is a good place to start, because it is labor intensive, and that's what the Palestinians need. Last week, there was a London conference. I have been pushing for doing much more in terms of having practical projects. Unfortunately, they didn't. It is necessary to finance all these needed projects now. The U.S. administration is saying that we want 350 million dollars for the Palestinians, a request which I support.

But I also understand that in the last year, we have seen a colossal windfall in oil revenues for the oil exporting states in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia alone had a 30-billion-dollar windfall of revenue because of increasing oil prices. The Saudis and others in OPEC used to be concerned that if prices of oil went up too high, they would kill the golden goose and create a setback in western economies, reduce demand, especially for oil. They used to say \$25.00 to \$30.00 a barrel is the optimum level; \$40.00 a barrel would kill the golden goose. Now we're running at \$55.00 a barrel. A year back, the price was between \$25.00 and \$27.00 a barrel. I went on Al Jazeera and I said all I want from the Arab oil states that have had the windfall of revenues is 1% to finance housing and other projects for the Palestinians. 1% so the Palestinian authority can provide the social safety net that Hamas has provided in Gaza, and help the PA professionalize its security forces. If they care so much about the Palestinian cause, this is the least they can

do. The administration and the EU wrote to the Gulf States asking them to give more assistance. Ironically, the Kuwaitis, the UAE and Qatar, are 400 million dollars in arrears in terms of promises they made to the Palestinians. All that is asked from the Gulf Arab states is to fulfill their pledges. The Saudis fulfill their pledges, namely 7 million dollars a month. They had a 30 billion dollar windfall this last year. A windfall is something you didn't expect, something you didn't pay for. Oil prices are still at \$55.00 a barrel, which means they can't claim that there's a cash flow problem. I want the gulf oil states, who say they care about the Palestinians to put their money where their mouth is. I want us to say it publicly if they don't do that.

A third recommendation: When I was in Gaza and Ramallah two months ago, one of the things I heard from many Palestinians is that the greatest threat to Abu Mazen being able to secure a calm environment, which is key to reform and to getting Israel to lift the checkpoints, was going to come from Hezbollah. Hezbollah was in fact offering \$100,000 to any Palestinian faction that will go kill Israelis. They said, not only is that a threat to them or a threat to what he wants to do, it is also a threat to him. I want us to coordinate with the British, French, and the Germans on this issue. We are beginning to coordinate with them on Iran as it relates to the nuclear issue. Blair came to Washington right after our election. He stood next to President Bush and said, "The most important issue in the world is the Israeli/Palestinian issue." The UK, Germany, and France are involved in negotiations with Iran. What Iran is seeking in return for extending what is a temporary suspension of enrichment activities, what they're seeking in return for that is a cluster of political benefits, economic benefits and technological benefits. If the issue that is most important in the world is being subverted by Iran, that subsidizes Hezbollah with about 100 million dollars a year, if they represent a threat to the issue he considers to be the most important in the world, then this issue has to be on the table and the Iranians have to understand they'll get nothing unless this behavior changes.

Now, a fourth recommendation: There will be an Arab Summit Conference in two weeks. I want the Arab leaders to embrace what Abu Mazen has done. I don't just want them to embrace what Abu Mazen has done; I want them to echo

what he has said. Abu Mazen has said violence is wrong, that we need a ceasefire, that the only way we are going to achieve our national aspirations is through non-violence and negotiations. We have rarely heard Arab leaders say that. I want them to embrace that, and then say it in a declaration. We should be working to help ensure that such declaration is issued. Why? Because it will legitimize what Abu Mazen is doing and help him in Palestinian society and will also raise the cost to Hamas and Islamic Jihad of reaching the ceasefire. We need to think of how to raise the cost of those who are trying to threaten that or are the biggest threat to peace. It hasn't happened before. We need to do it now.

A fifth recommendation: There's one other thing Abu Mazen needs. He needs to show that his way works in offering a political pathway. I said that he doesn't have a consensus among the Palestinians to reverse the Arafatist position of no adjustment or no compromise on Jerusalem, refugees, and borders. He can't deal with these issues right now or even touch them. But he still needs to be able to show that he has a pathway that can lead to the fulfillment of Palestinian needs. What is the way to do that? The way to do that is by reactivating the Road Map. The Road Map To Peace has 52 paragraphs and each has about 4 obligations for Israel and the Palestinians. The Road Map is a political framework. Sharon in the Sharon/Bush letter insisted that the president say in the letter of reassurance that we would not accept any initiative other than the Road Map. Abu Mazen says he wants to see the Road Map activated now. In the Road Map as it exists every paragraph, every one of them, whether Israeli obligation or Palestinian obligation, is defined differently by the two sides. The Israelis define their obligations minimally and the Palestinian obligations maximally and the Palestinians define their own obligations minimally and Israeli obligations maximally. If the Road Map is to be useful, we have to get the two sides to come to an understanding on what each of these obligations means.

Abu Mazen said the Road Map should be reactivated. Yet the Road Map in the first phase requires him to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure. He says they accepted the Road Map. I assure you Abu Mazen has no intention of dismantling terrorist capability and infrastructure right now. If he did, that would be a

strategy of confrontation and his strategy is one of co-optation. But it's not only Abu Mazen who isn't ready to fulfill the first phase of the Road Map. Neither is Sharon. There is a report that was issued today in Israel that shows what has been going on over the years: how the Israelis in fact funded settlements and hid the funding for settlements. How the unauthorized settler outposts were part of a plan that reflected connivance between those who had supported settlers within the government and the settlers themselves. The Prime Minister is studying it now. The significance of this is there are many unauthorized settler outposts there. According to the 1st phase of the Road Map, Israel is supposed to dismantle all the settler outposts, which are caravans, at least started that way, that had been founded since March 2001. Even here there is no agreement between the two sides on numbers.

Moreover, the Israelis, according to the Road Map, in phase one, are supposed to put a freeze on all the settlement activity including natural growth. Sharon, who is facing difficulties including the threat of assassination from West Bank settlers for his decision to get out of Gaza, is not about to decide to take on more troubles from settlers before he carries out the withdrawal from Gaza. He is not going to do what is required in the first phase of the Road Map. Does that mean that the Road Map is irrelevant? It means we should bring the two sides together and begin to work on the definition of each obligation so it is understood the same way and what is the sequence for what they are going to do. Each has a problem with carrying out their obligations. So let's come to an understanding of what they can do and when to do it. Abu Mazen can't be in the business of providing a ceasefire. He has to show a pathway to address the political aspirations of Palestinians. In 2003, there was a ceasefire, which held for 52 days, and then broke down. There was no common understanding of what it was. There was no bridge to the future as to where we can go from here. If the Road Map provides a pathway, it has to be negotiated to become a bridge between where we are and where we want to go. That's not going to happen unless we get back into the business of being a broker.

There is one other thing we have to be a broker about. We have to manage the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. This is a huge deal because it will establish a

precedent. If there's one lesson from the past that I repeat over and over in my book, it is that nothing happens by itself or implements itself. You want to work it out? You've got to preside over the implementation, work with both sides, and hold them to the commitments they make. I said one of the new factors is that there's an intention on the part of the Bush Administration in its second term to be more involved than before. I want to see that intention translated into specific behaviors that will allow us to take advantage of the moment. If we don't, it will be a long time before we have another one. When I was out there two months ago, one of the guards said to me, "We cannot afford to have Abu Mazen fail a second time." Abu Mazen was the Prime Minister in 2003 and had to resign. What he said was that all who believe in reform, renewal, creating a political process with institutionalization have to show that our way can work. If he goes down, they go down with him, and then the only option you're going to have out there is Hamas that doesn't believe in coexistence. If we miss this moment, the stakes are going to be high.

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