WASHINGTON, Oct. 1 — Before the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, the Bush administration was on the verge of announcing a Middle East diplomatic initiative that would include United States support for the creation of a Palestinian state, administration officials said, and it is now weighing how to revive the plan.

The initiative was to have been detailed in a speech by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell at the United Nations General Assembly and represented the first time a Republican administration has backed a Palestinian state.

Senior members of the Bush administration had been critical of former President Clinton's aggressive efforts to broker a Middle East settlement, saying the United States could not impose a peace that the parties did not want. But the plan Secretary Powell was preparing to present included proposals for a comprehensive settlement and an American role in carrying it out.

Administration officials say Mr. Bush is still considering making a forceful declaration on resolving the Middle East's most intractable crisis, but the timing has not yet been decided.

American intervention in the Middle East conflict, which President Bush sought to play down in his first eight months in the White House, has assumed much broader importance as the administration tries to enlist Arab backing in forcing Afghanistan's Taliban rulers...
to end their support of Osama bin Laden. Many moderate Arab states have made clear that a serious American engagement in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a condition for their support of the administration's drive to crush terrorism.

In the speech, administration officials said, Secretary Powell was to express the administration's general view of a final settlement of crucial questions relating to borders, right of return of Palestinian refugees and perhaps the future of Jerusalem.

The White House had also decided before Sept. 11 that Mr. Bush would meet the Palestinian leader, Yasir Arafat, during the United Nations gathering in New York, a meeting that would not carry the weight of a handshake in the Oval Office.

Most of the General Assembly session was canceled because of the strain such a gathering of international leaders would put on New York City's overburdened public safety agencies.

In the aftermath of the attacks, as Secretary Powell organized the international coalition against terror, he signaled to friendly Arab countries that the administration would follow through on its desire for a more visible role in the Middle East by the United States. But the Israeli-Palestinian initiative was postponed.

Now Arab leaders are urging Mr. Bush to push forward with the initiative because it would help them build support in their countries for the American-led fight against international terrorism, which is likely to involve military action against Muslim populations.

At the State Department, some officials argue that Secretary Powell should make the planned speech sooner rather than later, and certainly before military operations begin against Mr. bin Laden and his forces inside Afghanistan.

In that way, the administration could more successfully defuse criticism that officials know is bound to come from Israel and from American Jews that the United States was pandering to the Arab states by pushing for a peace settlement now.

"The question is, would we have more leverage" now, or after any military action, one official said. "The answer is now."
Another consideration for the administration is how the speech would fit into the overall strategy of the administration's coalition building, a senior official said.

The Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, and some Jewish groups in the United States supported Mr. Bush's earlier hands-off approach to the Israel-Palestinian conflict and showed no enthusiasm for laying out a diplomatic initiative at the United Nations in September.

But at a National Security Council meeting the first week in September, the decision was made to present the initiative to the United Nations session in the last week of September.

Secretary Powell was to carry the public message that the administration was taking its first concerted steps toward forcing a breakthrough, while Mr. Bush was to meet privately with Mr. Arafat to bolster their relationship and to impress upon him that compromises would have to be made by both sides.

Arab leaders and diplomats have urged the administration to capitalize on the current situation, which they say allows the United States to show it is serious about resolving the conflict and assuring Arab populations that Washington is not one-sided in its approach.

In describing the resumed deliberations about the initiative in the last few days, one administration official said it would be intended as a starting point for peace negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians.

The initiative would take into account the progress made at the failed Camp David negotiations during the Clinton administration last year but would stop well short of the specifics that Mr. Clinton made in January in a New York speech just before leaving office.

In that speech, Mr. Clinton said there could be no resolution without a "sovereign and viable Palestinian state," but he also went on to outline a Jerusalem that would be open and undivided and would be the recognized capital of two states, Israel and Palestine.

The United States would have embassies in both these capitals. He said Israel could not be expected to acknowledge the right of return of Palestinian refugees, which could overwhelm Israel with hundreds of thousands of Palestinians.

Arab diplomats say they know the Bush administration's initiative will not go nearly as far.

But to be effective, according to one diplomat, the initiative must "target the Arab audience."

Another Arab diplomat said the Bush administration had to go "much further than just
trying to stop the violence."

"It should be as specific as possible, including on Jerusalem," the envoy said.

As the administration debated how to unveil its plan — and what precisely to put in it — officials were also considering whether to appoint a special Middle East envoy.

In a speech today, the former United States ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk, said the administration should appoint a special envoy to the Middle East as a way to pressure both sides to reduce the violence and move to the negotiating table.

The assistant secretary of state for Near East Affairs in the first Bush administration, Edward P. Djerejian, has been considered for the job, officials said.

Mr. Djerejian, who has expressed concern about what he sees as Washington's deteriorating relationship with the Arab world, met with Secretary Powell and his staff last week. He did not return a telephone call today.

Dennis B. Ross, the Middle East negotiator in the Clinton administration, said that while the Bush administration had made a commitment to articulate a new framework for peace, "I don't think they had yet decided what to put in it."

"He also said it will be very difficult for the administration to proceed now.

"The mood of the Israeli and Palestinian public is all wrong for that because you have got a situation where neither side thinks he has a partner for peace."