



Interview with Ambassador Dennis Ross
Counselor, The Washington Institute

Conducted by Benjamin Pauker, Senior Editor, *Foreign Policy*
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There are few people in Washington who know the complex diplomatic shoals of the Middle East as well as Ambassador Dennis Ross. Over the course of three administrations -- both Republican and Democrat -- he has witnessed multiple efforts to create a lasting peace between Israel and Palestine, crafted a strategic policy of sanctions on and containment of Iran, and most recently held a portfolio at the National Security Council that ranged from the Mediterranean to the Bay of Bengal.

In a wide-ranging interview with *Foreign Policy* following his December departure from Barack Obama's administration, he claimed that the sanctions on Iran are working, that Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad can't hold on indefinitely, and that Israel and Palestine are perhaps further from peace than at any time in recent memory.

Foreign Policy: There's an intense debate right now about what to do with Iran's nuclear program. If you were the Iranians, why wouldn't you say, "Look, I know there are certain costs involved in getting nuclear weapons. But when we get one, the world will have to deal with us and we will not be as isolated. We will become a power on the global stage."

Dennis Ross: If the Iranians get a nuclear weapon, they can cast a shadow of power where they couldn't before, and they can engage in greater leverage and coercion. There will be an impulse by their neighbors to counter that, and if they end up producing a Middle East with a number of countries that have nuclear weapons, they're certainly not going to be better off. In fact they're probably worse off.

So now they're experiencing very high costs. Look at what's happening in terms of the fluctuation of their currency. They're going to lose their sources -- or at least some significant source -- of their revenue, meaning the emerging oil boycott coming out of Europe.

When they look out and see this, are they really going to be better off? They also have a way out, because what they say they want is civil nuclear power. There's always been an option for them for civil nuclear power. What there isn't an option for is a nuclear-weapons capability. At least publicly, that's not what they're aiming toward, and yet their behavior belies what they're publicly saying. Nonetheless, if they wanted a way to save face and to say they have achieved their objective, there is a way for them to do that and to take off all the pressure at the same time.

FP: How much do the politics of an election year here affect the Obama administration's calculus or the line that they are taking towards Iran this year?

DR: You know, I really don't see that as being an instrumental factor...

FP: I just wonder if, in terms of rhetoric or approach, we'll see a change this year?

DR: There has been a consistent approach to the Iranians from the beginning of the Obama administration. When the Obama administration came into power, the Iranians were not isolated internationally,

were seemingly on a roll in the region, were progressing in their nuclear program, were not paying an economic price that convinced them that they had to make a choice.

The thrust of the administration's approach was using engagement as a means, not an end, and as something that could mobilize pressure if the Iranians didn't respond. The whole approach was based on the premise the dynamic has to change.

The Iranians have to be put in a position where they have to understand that they cannot continue on the path they're on without paying a price. They have to make a choice; they can't think they can evade a choice. If they continue on this path, then the pressure is going to be ratcheted up and will be continued to be ratcheted up until we see them make a change in their behavior.

Look at the degree of Iranian isolation now, internationally or regionally, and the scope of what's happening in terms of sanctions on them right now, where they can't do business with a reputable bank internationally, they can't do business in dollars and euros, they can't get insurance for their ships. You have the Iranian president declaring a year ago when sanctions were being posed that the Iranians sneezed at the sanctions, completely belittling them, but now he describes them as the most severe economic onslaught that any country has experienced.

The point is that there was a natural progression here. Along the way there has always been an opportunity for the Iranians to find a way out. They haven't done it, even though their nuclear program is not where it was projected to be, though they continue to make progress.

FP: What's the red line for kinetic action or a strike?

DR: I can't say what the administration's red line is. [Defense Secretary Leon] Panetta has described his red line in his interviews, which relates to [the Iranians'] crossing a threshold on weapons.

I think you want to be careful how you describe red lines, because one consequence of defining red lines too narrowly is that it sends a message to the Iranians: "We can do everything up to that red line," and that may not be what you want. What Secretary Panetta has outlined is an understandable red line, but it may not be the only red line.

FP: What do you think the effect of an Israeli strike on Iran would be, regionally, if it comes to that? Would we see an all-out war?

DR: There are a lot of different dimensions to the question. I have no doubt that Hezbollah would do something at a time when change is coming in Syria, which has been the conduit for most of its military assistance. But Hezbollah may not want to expose themselves so much. They would have to think about what their own future would be.

I think the effect on the region might not be as widespread as one thinks, though certainly Hezbollah would do something. That can't be dismissed. And the Iranians themselves would have to think about how much they would want to escalate, because they would try to present themselves as a victim with the hope that it would reduce the pressure on them.

But this is a region that has no sympathy for the Iranians. They're so out of step with what's happening with the region, and the support for the Syrian regime's killing of their own people has further cemented the image that the Iranians are basically a sectarian force, and little more than that.

FP: What is the status now, from your vantage point, on the relationship between Jerusalem and Washington?

DR: There isn't a Republican or Democratic approach to Israel; there's an American approach to Israel. I think that's been consistent, and certainly in the area of security, the nature of this relationship today is more advanced in many respects than it was going back a number of different administrations. The scope, character, intensity of the dialogue across the whole range of national security issues -- the level of cooperation, sharing of assessments, the kinds of exercises -- there really isn't a precedent.

FP: Does the personal animus or the distrust between [U.S. President Barack] Obama and [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu affect the calculus in any way?

DR: I know there's a conventional wisdom out there about that...

FP: The [overheard conversation](#) at the G-20 [summit], I think, furthered that somewhat...

DR: Well the context of that conversation was the president going over to [French President Nicolas] Sarkozy, emphasizing to him that what the Palestinians were doing at the U.N. was threatening the whole U.N. push for.... The point is that Sarkozy then responds, and the president is in a sense saying, "Alright, look, I deal with him every day," but by the same token, shifted the conversation right back to what he raised, which is: We have to lean on the Palestinians to stop this behavior at the U.N.

The context I put it in is the following: The president [Obama] and the prime minister [Netanyahu] have probably had more extensive one-on-one conversations than the president has had with any other leader. Whenever Israel has faced a real problem -- the prime minister has faced something of deep concern to him -- the first person he's called has been the president. When the [Gaza] flotilla incident took place, the first foreign leader he called was the president. When the Israelis had six people in their embassy under siege in Cairo, their survival literally in question, the first foreign leader he called was the president. Whenever he has any sense that Israel has a major problem, he calls the president.

There's a reality to the relationship that is quite professional on issues that are fundamental and matter. There is in fact a high degree of trust.

FP: Regarding the peace process, peace seems almost further away than ever. Do you agree?

DR: I do think there's a paradox today. When I go back and I look at the time I worked on this issue, and I look at where the two sides actually are in terms of substance, it isn't to say that on the core issues there aren't differences. Of course there are differences. But the differences substantively, they're not as profound as the psychological gaps.

When you look at polls [of Israelis and Palestinians] where the terms of a possible outcome are identified, you find an extraordinary convergence -- between 60 and 70 percent of the public on each side prepared to embrace those kinds of terms. And yet the same 60 to 70 percent are convinced it's never going to happen. So there's a real psychological gap, and that psychological gap creates a context for the two leaders. They have not had communication, and I think the psychological gaps have compounded the substantive gaps and made it really hard to get to the substantive gaps.

We're not on the brink of any kind of breakthrough. But there's a cost when there's a stalemate. There's no such thing as a status quo, particularly in this part of the world. It's never static. What you can't afford is to have a stalemate when those who reject the very idea of a two-state solution are able to exploit it to increasingly undermine the prospect of it. I think the premise of your question is right -- we're not on the brink of a breakthrough. And yet it's important to try to find ways to overcome the stalemate.

FP: Do you think the current Palestinian government is one that Israel can work with and the United States can bring into negotiations?

DR: I think it's very difficult. I think that Abu Mazen [Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas] has made a decision that he doesn't really believe that this Israeli government is capable of doing a deal, or at least one he can live with. Therefore, he continues to impose conditions for going into negotiations.

There are preparatory talks right now. They're decidedly portrayed not as negotiations but as preparatory talks, and that's a good thing. I hope the Palestinians give them a chance.

Abu Mazen doesn't want to get into formal negotiations that he thinks are going to fail. But the more you continue to avoid getting into formal negotiations, the higher the bar you create for those negotiations, and the harder it is to justify them. I don't think that will ultimately suit the Palestinian interest.

FP: Do you think the congressionally mandated funding cuts to the Palestinian Authority are a good idea?

DR: I don't think they're a good idea because in a sense, the one thing that still makes sense is to preserve the possibility of a two-state outcome. I think you want to be validating those who believe in nonviolence and coexistence, and to his credit, Abu Mazen does believe in nonviolence and coexistence. Even when you're having a hard time overcoming difficulties, you need to look at where are the openings possible and how can one continue to validate those who actually believe in a two-state outcome and nonviolence.

I understand very well why the Israeli government did the deal to get Gilad Shalit back; there's a basic compact between the Israeli government and the Israeli military. Everybody in Israeli society serves in the military. But the consequence of that deal was not to validate those who believe in nonviolence, but Hamas and those who believe in violence.

FP: Do you think that future progress is impossible as long as the Palestinians continue to unilaterally push for statehood at the U.N.? Is this something that they need to back away from for negotiations to work?

DR: I understand they're frustrated, and I understand they want to resume means that are nonviolent. But the more they pursue the U.N. route, the more they raise questions in the minds of mainstream Israel about their purposes, and the less the prospect they're going to achieve what they want.

If those who believe in nonviolence and coexistence can point to the fact that Israeli control is being reduced and that their way is ultimately going to be the one that produces a state, then there's a payoff. But if you're going the U.N. route, there's not going to be a payoff. It's all symbolism. It alienates the mainstream in Israel; it convinces them that it's about delegitimizing Israel, not trying to coexist with it, so it ends up being self-defeating, and it also puts us in a position where it literally threatens the U.N. system.

FP: Do you think it was a mistake to call for a settlement freeze back in the first year of the Obama administration?

DR: Settlements have been an issue for a long time. I prefer to look forward and not backwards. I do think the whole effort that was made, in the president's speeches last May to talk about borders and security, was a way to make the settlement issue moot, because if you can resolve the borders, it's no longer an issue. The fact is that settlements are a permanent-status issue. They're a permanent-status issue that can be resolved through negotiations.

FP: Didn't the settlement freeze push the Palestinians into a position where they said, "We can't be seen as being less aggressive than the United States on this"?

DR: The administration never made it a precondition [for talks]. The Palestinians made it a precondition.

FP: Looking forward, as you said, what are the next steps? Is [the peace process] a second-term issue for presidents, by and large?

DR: I don't think it has to be. The essence of statecraft is to recognize that you may have an objective, but if you can't achieve that objective now, look at what you can do to try to change what is impossible today to what is possible over time.

One thing that can be done at this stage is to be thinking about approaches where you can change the realities on the ground in a way that validates the Palestinians who believe in nonviolence and coexistence.

And by the way, if you're validating them, it becomes easier for them not to be pursuing steps like the steps at the U.N.

So there can even be a kind of reciprocity. You can create a package of approaches, but there's no reason to think that nothing can be done just because it's difficult at this point. Even if there isn't going to be an immediate breakthrough, you can do other things that change the context and that make breakthroughs over time more likely.

FP: I want to move onto Syria. You've said before that [Syrian President Bashar] al-Assad is on his way out. Do you still hold that line?

DR: A regime that is based on coercion and fear, that is not able to use coercion and fear to stop an opposition -- by definition, its time is limited. I don't know how long it's going to take.

But the longer he's there, the worse it is for Syria. The longer he's there, the more he deepens the sectarian divide. He's trying to portray others as being the source of this, but he's the one who is doing it. They're not. And internally, he continues to create a fantasy of [the protests'] being driven by a foreign conspiracy.

It's very hard to predict, but I do think there will be certain kinds of defections on the inside that will likely accelerate [the regime's collapse]. The more there is pressure from the outside -- not only in terms of the economic pressure, but more in dealing with the [opposition] Syrian National Council (SNC) to demonstrate that it really represents the future -- the more I think that will lessen the time [it takes for Assad to fall].

The regime acts as if it has a license to kill. So I'd like to take Assad's own words and turn them against him. If he's so convinced there's a foreign conspiracy, he should be one of the first to have an interest in trying to reveal what's going on. One of the best ways to do it is to bring a lot more monitors. If Assad believes what he claims, he shouldn't be opposed to having dramatically more monitors in there as one way to protect Syrian civilians. If he's so certain that he's right about this, he should have no reason to fear not just 165, but a couple thousand monitors. If he has nothing to fear, then allow a large number of monitors in there, allow journalists to go in there, and at least increase the prospect that there can be greater protection for the Syrian people.