

Iran Cannot Be a Partner in the Struggle Against ISIS

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Sep 11, 2016

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/ayran-la-ymkn-tsbh-shrykaan-fy-alsra-dd-dash\)](/ar/policy-analysis/ayran-la-ymkn-tsbh-shrykaan-fy-alsra-dd-dash)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.

In this in-depth interview, the veteran advisor and peace envoy discusses the regional consequences of the Iran nuclear deal and the possibility of progress in the Israeli-Palestinian arena.

American Middle East envoy Dennis Ross has served in the Administrations of Presidents Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama. He has been a prime mover in nearly every major American initiative to support regional peace initiatives, including the 1991 Middle East Peace Conference in Madrid, Spain and the 2000 Middle East Peace Summit at Camp David. A voice on Gulf affairs for four decades, he served as Special Advisor for the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, and subsequently, on the President's National Security Council, and held overall responsibility for policies toward the Middle East, the Gulf, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and South Asia. Since departing the Obama Administration in 2011, he has voiced criticism of some of the President's policies, notably his approach toward Iran.

In his interview with Majalla's Joseph Braude, Ross reflects on outcomes of the Iranian nuclear deal. He outlines an alternative course of action vis a vis Iran and the struggle against its proxies in Lebanon, Syria, and elsewhere. He assesses the legacy of the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war ten years later and prospects for a regional strategy to weaken Hezbollah today. He also weighs in on the Arab Peace Initiative and its crucial role in efforts to overcome the obstacles toward an Israeli-Palestinian settlement.

More than a year has passed since the signing of the Join Comprehensive Plan of Action with the Iranian government. How do you view the outcome thus far, and has anything surprised you?

Frankly, I have not been surprised by what has transpired in the last year. It was always in Iran's interest to have the sanctions lifted. In return, Iran's leadership was prepared to defer its nuclear ambitions, though not surrender them. Although within the JCPOA, the Iranians did make a commitment to never seek or acquire nuclear weapons, they are nonetheless allowed to build a nuclear industrial base. And after 15 years pass, they will still retain a nuclear weapon

option. They are retaining the capability, and therefore retaining the option. What we get in return is that we're buying time: 10-15 years. But when I say there was no surprise here for me, I mean that I also expected that there would be an increase in Iran's bad behavior in the region. I knew that because I understood that the Supreme Leader had to validate his ideology. When he does a deal with the U.S., it raises questions. In the aftermath of doing a deal, I expected that he would have to say that nothing has changed. I expected that he would challenge America and its interests and the interests of America's friends even more consistently. And indeed, Iran's behavior within the region continues to be aggressive. They believe they have a right to dominate the region, because they look down on the Arabs, think they have a superior culture, and see the US as being their main impediment. Now we see unease among America's traditional friends in the region because the US is perceived as being less willing to confront or counter Iranian aggressiveness in the region.

Are some of America's traditional allies in the Middle East correct in perceiving the Obama Administration as seeking to establish an alliance with Iran at their expense?

The real truth is that the Administration would like to see a fundamental change in the US-Iranian relationship. It understands that it's not able to achieve that right now, but it doesn't want to act in a way that it believes would strengthen the hardliners of Iran. I understand the Administration's position, but I don't agree with it. The reason is, the logic of what produced the negotiation with the Iranians on the nuclear issue -- and I was part of it -- was, build the pressure on the Iranians but leave them a way out. I believe that the same logic should be applied to Iran's regional behavior. Iran had said repeatedly that they would not negotiate on their nuclear program so long as they were under sanctions. And yet they did negotiate. When it became clear that the wellbeing of the Islamic Republic itself was at risk, they had to shift their approach on the nuclear issue. And as a result, we bought 10-15 years. So when you build the pressure on them and leave them a way out, they understand that to ensure that their interests don't suffer, they have to adjust their behavior. And what I'm suggesting is, that by applying pressure in response to their regional behavior, it would not strengthen the hard line but rather weaken it, because you would demonstrate the cost to Iran of its bad behavior. Who do you want to be seen as successful -- Qasem Soleimani or Rouhani? The Revolutionary Guard and the Basij are more oriented toward a confrontational approach, whereas the Rouhani constituency is more oriented toward a normalizing approach. So I'm suggesting, if you want to affect the balance of power between them, the way you do it is not by acquiescing to what Soleimani is doing in the region, but rather to raise the costs to Iran for Soleimani's actions.

Built into your analysis is the assumption that there truly are two different approaches within the Iranian leadership, in contest with each other, as opposed to a game of "good cop-bad cop" designed for outsiders' consumption.

I do think there's more than just a stylistic difference between the two. I don't call Rouhani "moderate," but I do call him pragmatic. Rouhani believes in a less confrontational posture toward the outside world and the region. And that can be a good thing. It means there's less of an impulse on his part to use the Shi'ite militias to weaken Sunni governments. So we have to demonstrate that there's a high cost to Iran in doing just that. If you temper Iran's behavior, that's more likely to redound to Rouhani's benefit. Where I disagree with the Administration is, they want to actually empower the Rouhanis, and they think that by not doing provocative things -- by not reacting every time the Iranians do something -- that that will strengthen the Rouhanis. And they fear that if they do things that do seem provocative, then it strengthens the hand of the Revolutionary Guard.

So explain your envisioned approach in practical terms.

First, begin contingency planning with key GCC states as well as the Israelis to focus on how we can counter the Iranian use of the Shi'i militias. Because this is their tool. We need to show we have the means to counter them and develop options to do that. Second, we need to do more in Syria to raise the costs to the Russians, the Iranians, and

the Shi'ite militias of what they're doing.

Meaning military action?

There's no way to produce any kind of a political outcome under the current circumstances. You have UN Security Council Resolution 2254 based on a cessation of hostilities, negotiations, and a political transition. The Russians agreed to this, and yet what are they doing now? Recently they crossed a pretty remarkable threshold: Russian bombers were flying from Iranian bases to strike Aleppo and other targets in Syria. Meanwhile, they're still negotiating with the US to share intelligence and have a joint coordination operational center to coordinate air strikes. They're hitting the opposition groups who opened a corridor to break the siege of Aleppo. This is completely at odds with the theory of why we are supposedly negotiating with them. And to me that speaks to the level of strategic cooperation between Russia and Iran. Maybe it doesn't extend to other areas, but when it comes to Syria, Russia and Iran share an objective. The Russians may be happy with a partition of Syria. After all, if they have a partition of Syria that essentially leaves them Western Syria from north to south, then the Assad regime will have control over the majority of the population but a minority of the territory. And that's fine from Assad's standpoint, Putin's standpoint, and the Iranian standpoint. What matters to the Iranians is being able to preserve Hezbollah's leverage. So to return to your question, I mean for us to make it clear to the Russians that we're prepared to live up to Resolution 2254, but if they're not, then we're going to begin to act to change the balance of power on the ground. We make it clear to the Russians that there can be no political outcome so long as Assad remains -- only more refugees and more instability, and that's not acceptable to us. So next time Assad wants to drop barrel bombs, we will use standoff strikes to destroy the airfields that the helicopters are flying from. That, for example, will send a message to the Iranians and to our friends that we mean what we say. The contingency planning sends the message that we get the nature of the threat, and that's why we're preparing options to counter it.

With less than half a year left in the Obama Administration, what are your concerns about how Iran and its allies may seek to take advantage of the so-called "lame duck presidency"?

I think part of what's happening now in Aleppo is that Putin, Assad, and the Iranians want to make sure they'll regain Aleppo to create a different reality on the ground for the next White House. I doubt that the Administration will do more to try to get material support on the ground to those who are fighting the regime in Aleppo. Because Jabhat Al-Nusra is part of those who are fighting, there's a hesitancy on the part of the Administration to do so. I understand the concern, but it's co-located with much of the rest of the opposition. And so when the Russians hit the Nusra Front, we effectively give them a license to say, "We're just hitting the Nusra Front." Meanwhile there has been a level of cooperation with some of our friends in the region in terms of intelligence and some broader security matters, but not in terms of actively countering the Iranians. We did one interdiction of a boat carrying weapons to Yemen. I'd like to see us do more, but I don't think the Obama administration will do much more.

Some American policy voices seem to view Iran as a potential ally in the struggle against ISIS. What is your view?

I have said repeatedly and publicly that Iran cannot be a partner in the struggle against ISIS. That doesn't mean that they might not be fighting ISIS in places, although the only place they're really fighting it is with some of the militias in Iraq, and even there, they're doing it in a way that frequently harms the Iraqi central government. And that's why they can't be a partner in the struggle against ISIS. In the aftermath of ISIS, we will need Sunni governance. Because there will be a "son of ISIS" if there is continuing exclusion of Sunnis, denial of rights, and a perception and reality of Shia militias ruling over Sunni areas. That's why we need partnership with the Sunnis, not the Iranians. Part of the criticism of the Administration has been, so long as we don't take the threat perception of Iran as seriously as many in the GCC take it, it's going to be very hard to attract Sunnis in the kind of role we'd like to see them play. That's why I say, we have to do more to counter the Iranians. We'll be in a better position to confront and ultimately defeat ISIS.

How in your view might Saudis view Iran differently than do American policymakers?

There is no question that the Saudis see Iran as an existential threat. From a Saudi standpoint, they look at what Iran is doing in the Eastern Province, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, and they see an effort at encirclement. So it's not surprising to me that when there's been a concern that the US won't draw limits on Iran, the Saudis feel the need to impose their own limits. So we see what's going on in Yemen as a small part of Saudi Arabia showing that it will impose its own red lines. I know the Saudis have uncovered caches of arms inside the Eastern Province. I know the same thing has happened in Bahrain. A lot of the weapons were the most advanced form of IEDs. So the Saudis are contending with what they see as an existential threat.

What is your view of President Obama's suggestion to an American journalist that Saudi Arabia should "share the neighborhood" with Iran?

If the President was trying to say, Iran is a regional power and should be accepted as a regional power, and others in the region should understand that, well, in the abstract, coexistence makes sense provided the one you're coexisting with is not a predator. Perhaps the President should have said, once Iran demonstrates to its neighbors it's not a threat, then it becomes possible to integrate the Iranians into a regional structure. They're a country of over 80 million, so of course they are a factor in the region. They have interests that can be understood, but not if the interests are defined in terms of regional dominance. So the President might have done well to frame the issue along those lines, and stress that Iran should not use the militias as a way of breaking down state authority. Everybody seems to focus on ISIS as breaking down the authority of states. But look at Iranian behavior: Hezbollah has a stranglehold over Lebanon. In Baghdad, the idea of liberating Mosul after Falluja and Ramadi is right. But when you have Shi'ite militias entering and engaging in torture and looting as some have, that only deepens the sectarian divide. Moreover, in Iraq, the Iranians continue to use the leverage they have to prevent an inclusive approach to governance, which is what's required. It's not an accident they support the Houthis. Everywhere you see them using this kind of instrument to break down the authority of the government itself. So if there's going to be a different approach that treats Iran as a country within the region, then Iran has to show it's prepared to recognize the interests of others and not threaten them.

This summer also marked ten years since the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. How do you view the conflict in hindsight, and what bearing does it have on present-day problems in the region?

In 2006 Hezbollah provoked a war by going into Israel, kidnapping several soldiers, and killing them, and was then surprised that Israel retaliated. Bear in mind, Israel had withdrawn from southern Lebanon in May of 2000. So when Hezbollah then went across the border and kidnapped Israeli soldiers, then-prime minister Ehud Olmert wanted to show that for that they would pay a terrible price. The problem was that the Israelis at the time framed their goal as destroying Hezbollah. They could not do that, even though they did show that they could impose a very high price. Nasrallah made a statement afterwards to the effect that if he had known how the Israelis were going to respond, he wouldn't have done this. But within Israel at the time, the war was seen as a failure. It went on for 34 days, with great destruction done to Lebanon, but Hezbollah wasn't destroyed. Over time, however, there has been a kind of reassessment within Israel, as it has become apparent that [a] deterrence was established. These days we still see Nasrallah giving speeches in which he says, "We can hit any part of Israel." But it sounds more like he is trying to bolster himself at a time when his whole preoccupation now is saving Assad in Syria.

Today Hezbollah is widely viewed in the region as purely an Iranian proxy. Do American policymakers share this view?

I think so. I have changed my own analysis. I used to think Hezbollah was primarily a Lebanese actor and secondarily an instrument of the Iranians. Syria has proven that, to the contrary, it's simply an instrument of the Iranians. What

it did in Syria was not for Lebanon's interest but for Iran's interest. At the time of the war with Israel in 2006, Nasrallah was seen in the broader region as kind of a hero of "resistance" to the Israelis. Interestingly, at the time, the Saudi foreign minister declared that Hezbollah had provoked this -- that it was an act of "adventurism." Hezbollah in truth imposed a war on all of Lebanon. Significant infrastructure and housing were destroyed, because Hezbollah embeds itself in civilian areas. Now Hezbollah's credibility as a Lebanese actor has been further diminished by what they've done in Syria. They effectively brought that war and the refugees to Lebanon. Initially they denied their involvement, but now they broadcast it.

To your knowledge does the organization maintain steadfast backing from Lebanese Shi'ites?

It would be wrong to say Hezbollah doesn't have Shi'ite support within Lebanon. But there have been increasing signs of more frustration among Shi'a within Lebanon about what Hezbollah has imposed on all of them. In addition to opinion polls indicating that Hezbollah is viewed more negatively, there has been a fair amount of reporting that the organization is drawing on younger and younger recruits -- 16- and 17-year olds -- and trying to use material incentives to bring them into the fight. There is anecdotal evidence of more and more frustration, unease, and unhappiness.

What steps can be taken to help defeat Hezbollah?

First, discredit it. The Gulf States have now adopted what has been an American policy, in designating Hezbollah a terrorist organization. In the U.S. we are also focused on the fact that they're money launderers, and drug traffickers -- which is also part of helping to discredit it. A collective approach can be helpful in this regard.

Second, establish broader cooperation in the region for those who have intelligence about Hezbollah. The U.S. should engage with all our partners in the region. There should be contingency planning with bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral options -- and this is also relevant to how you deal with Iran. There are a lot of capabilities in this region, and if you could pool these capabilities, it would create a force multiplier effect. There's a convergence of interests among many different players in the region, and how best to take advantage of it -- whether in terms of security, intelligence, counterterrorism, or otherwise -- is worth thinking about.

How do you explain the stasis in Israeli-Palestinian progress toward a negotiated settlement?

As you know, you're talking to someone who has spent the last 30 years of his life working on this issue, so for me, it's a kind of mission. I believe it's a mistake to approach diplomacy in terms of a binary choice -- either solve everything or do nothing -- because when you set up that equation, you do nothing. This applies to Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy. If it's a choice of either solving it right now or doing nothing, and it turns out you can't solve it right now, then the tendency is to do nothing. The result is a vacuum -- and inevitably, despair and hopelessness fill that vacuum, and those elements on each side that prey on despair and hopelessness will gain strength. That's what is happening between Israelis and Palestinians right now. Very little has been done since the Kerry effort failed in 2014, so there's no surprise that the two sides have lost any sense of possibility. The model of a strict bilateral negotiation between Israelis and Palestinians is not a model that's likely to work. The Palestinians are weak and divided right now, to the point that they even look at the negotiations themselves as a kind of concession that they cannot make. They are almost paralyzed -- frozen in time. So they fall back on, "Let's go to the UN." And that is not going to solve this. So you have to think about what you can do to change the realities.

What steps do you envision that may help to do so, and what do you see as the potential role of the "Arab Peace Initiative"?

I believe you have to operate on multiple levels. In terms of bilateral relations between Israelis and Palestinians, the next Administration needs to work quietly with both to help change things on the ground so as to restore a sense of possibility. But we also need an "Arab umbrella" -- for two reasons: The first is that Palestinians find it difficult to do

things exclusively on their own. They need an Arab cover. Second, the Israelis also need an "Arab cover," because the Israeli public has come to so disbelieve the Palestinians, that they feel that if they make a concession to the Palestinians, they won't get anything from them. With an Arab cover, perhaps if Israel makes a concession to the Palestinians, it can get something from the region. So this is where the Arab Peace Initiative becomes quite relevant -- because it is a broad umbrella. It becomes a vehicle for helping both sides.

What do your experiences as an Israeli-Palestinian negotiator under the Clinton administration show about the regional dimension in a potential resolution?

Before the Camp David Summit, we had done relatively little to involve the broader Arab region in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. So when President Clinton made some calls from the Summit he found it hard to persuade the Saudis, Egyptians, or Jordanians to encourage Arafat because they did not feel that they were read into what the proposals were and how far we were prepared to go. And at Camp David, we had only made proposals on borders and Jerusalem. But that changed in December of 2000 with the development of the "Clinton Parameters" for a resolution to the conflict, which made proposals on all the core issues, including refugees. We shared those parameters with a number of Arab leaders even before we shared them with Arafat -- in fact, even before we shared them with then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. The week before the Parameters were presented to the Palestinian and Israeli negotiating teams, I saw Prince Bandar bin Sultan Al Saud in London, and laid out pretty close to what they would be. I did this because I wanted the Saudis to be in a position where once we presented the Parameters to Arafat, if he told the Arabs, "I didn't get anything," then the Arabs could tell him, "Actually, you got a lot." President Clinton called President Mubarak once we presented the Parameters to the two negotiating teams and went over them with him as well. We were trying in our own way to create a context of greater Arab support. But what I'm talking about now is not just having Arab "support," but actually having a role in the process itself -- not in place of but along with the Palestinians.

What is the role of the public discussion in Israel and the Arab world while efforts to negotiate a settlement are underway?

One of our lessons from the past was that when there isn't a public education for peace, it makes it harder to actually negotiate peace. It's not sufficient to have a great relationship in private between negotiators while there is great public hostility on the outside. All sides need to in a sense be focused not on how they can be indicting the other side in public, but how they can be trying to create an atmosphere that makes peacemaking easier to achieve. It's easy to point out the negatives about the other side. But when something positive is done, that needs to be highlighted.

Please provide some examples -- on the Israeli as well as the Palestinian side.

Everybody hears about it when the Israelis hold up monies going to the Palestinian Authority. But when the Israelis give the Palestinians advances on the collection of duties, nobody knows that. Few know that at Hadassah hospital in Israel, Palestinians can go for treatment and are frequently not charged. There's a basic humanity there that should be acknowledged. When the Palestinian police forces act professionally -- not as Israel's policeman, but in providing law and order to Palestinians and countering terrorism that is a threat to them -- that should be acknowledged too. In other words, how about trying to create some virtuous cycles? ❖

Majalla



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)