Which One of These Presidents Was Toughest on Israel?

by Dennis Ross **(/experts/dennis-ross)**

May 19, 2016

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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.

Articles & Testimony

The Obama administration is hardly the first to distance itself from Israel based on false assumptions about Arab priorities.

Have the United States and Israel ever had a relationship as bad as the one between President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu? That is a question I am typically asked when speaking about my book ***Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship From Truman to Obama*** **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/doomed-to-succeed)** . The answer is yes. Ronald Reagan had a poor relationship with Menachem Begin, saying at one point, "Boy, he is a hard guy to like." And the only leader in the world who George H.W. Bush dealt with but did not like was Yitzhak Shamir, believing Shamir had misled him in their very first meeting after Bush became president.

Clearly, the feelings that U.S. presidents and Israeli prime ministers have about each other are not necessarily the measure of the relationship between the two countries. But it surely helps when the relationship is one of mutual trust and comfort. Bill Clinton's relationship with Yitzhak Rabin was the gold standard, with George W. Bush and Ehud Olmert being a very close second. Their belief in shared purposes and outlooks shaped their views of each other. There was great mutual respect and an inherent sense that the other could always be counted on when needed.

It would be reassuring if American presidents always had such relationships with their Israeli counterparts. But more often than not, such trusting relationships have been the exception rather than the rule. In the case of Obama and Netanyahu, there was a clash of personalities driven largely by very different worldviews, as well as differing politics and political friends. In the past, however, it often had less to do with personalities and more to do with presidents facing deep-seated assumptions in the national security bureaucracy about the Middle East and Israel's place in it.

Harry Truman did not have a single senior national security adviser in favor of U.S. recognition when David Ben-

Gurion declared the State of Israel. George C. Marshall, his secretary of state, James Forrestal, his secretary of defense, George Kennan, director of policy planning, and others all opposed recognition. Marshall, a five-star general, in an emotionally charged meeting on May 12, 1948, went so far as to say to Truman that if he were to recognize the State of Israel "and if in the elections I were to vote, I would vote against the president." Like all the other advisers, Marshall was convinced that U.S. recognition of the Jewish state would destroy our relationship with the Arabs and our position in the Middle East. Truman was not convinced and proved to be far more correct than the experts.

Old habits and assumptions about the region die hard. Consider that for the first two weeks after knifing attacks against Israelis began in October 2015, the State Department and the White House spokespersons urged calm and an end to the "cycle of violence." In other words, they made this a mutual issue, not one of Palestinian acts of terror against Israelis. The reason was that they did not want to be seen as critical of only Palestinians, lest they produce a backlash from the Palestinians and the Arabs more generally. At a time when the Arab world was not paying attention to the Palestinians and was instead consumed by the horrific conflict in Syria, the rise of ISIS, a proxy war in Yemen, an ongoing struggle within Egypt, a civil war in Libya -- not to mention Iran's hegemonic ambitions in the region -- the administration feared the reaction if it appeared to be taking Israel's side in simply condemning the stabbings and the incitement that led to them.

I don't mean to single out the Obama administration. Fearing an Arab backlash is not a mindset unique to the Obama administration. It is one that has existed in every administration from Truman to Obama. It remains embedded in a constituency of the national security apparatus that sees Israel as a problem and not a partner. Until the Reagan administration, there was no countervailing constituency or viewpoint in the national security bureaucracy. From Reagan's time onward, there has been a competing constituency that sees Israel more as a partner than a problem. Since Reagan, each president has determined the relative weight of these two groups and mindsets in their administrations. To be sure, leading players might have elements of both points of view and never be fully consistent in their outlook. Robert Gates, who served as secretary of defense under George W. Bush and Obama, is a good example of a leading player who over time saw Israel as a problem, but who could also see benefits in the relationship.

While there might not always be a pristine division between these constituencies, and some might straddle the divide or see Israel through a different light depending on the issue, there have been a number of interrelated assumptions that have endured. They were certainly more prevalent among those who saw Israel as more of a liability and less as an asset, but they were not limited to them. Three assumptions stand out: Distancing from Israel will benefit our relationship with the Arabs; cooperating with Israel will negatively impact our relationship with the Arabs; we will never be able to transform our position on the region or the region itself unless we resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

These assumptions have been passed on for so long that they have taken on a life of their own in parts of the State Department, the Pentagon and the Intelligence Community. They produce the mindset that led the Obama administration to try, at least initially, to avoid singling out the Palestinians for criticism over the stabbings. The remarkable thing about these assumptions is that they are dead wrong -- and yet they have endured. In my book, I show how they guided policies in different administrations and how the expectations that flowed from them never materialized, and yet the lessons were never learned. I need not go through chapter and verse to prove the point; a few examples that showcase the weakness of each of these assumptions will suffice.

Distance from Israel will produce gains with the Arabs

Five administrations deliberately distanced themselves from Israel, believing that this would produce payoffs with the Arabs. In all five of these administrations -- Eisenhower, Nixon, Carter, Bush 41 and Obama -- the president

actually believed that his predecessor had been too close to the Israelis, that it had cost us and that he needed to create distance. Eisenhower was the most deliberate in acting to create unmistakable distance from Israel. Not only did he suspend Truman's loans to Israel when the Israelis sought to use the Jordan River to develop hydroelectric power and the Arabs complained, but his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, would tell different Arab leaders in an extended trip to the Middle East in May 1953 that our interests were with them. Unlike the Democrats, he asserted, the Eisenhower administration would not be swayed by the domestic politics and the Jewish vote. (During this trip, Dulles would tell at least one Arab leader that we would "counter Israeli aggression." Recall that in May 1953, there were no occupied territories and Israel's neighbors rejected Israel's existence -- and were permitting fedayeen to carry out terrorist raids into Israel.) None of the Eisenhower efforts at distancing, including the threat to impose sanctions on Israel if it did not withdraw from the Sinai after the 1956 war, would pay off. The Arabs were not responsive. Moreover, he was unable to keep the Soviet Union out of the Middle East, as it became the main supplier of arms to the Egyptians, Syrians and Iraqis during Eisenhower's administration. There was no advocate in this administration for Israeli interests or the U.S. relationship with Israel. Indeed, those who saw Israel as a problem controlled all levers of decision-making on the Middle East, and yet when John F. Kennedy came into office, he judged Eisenhower's policies in the Middle East to have been a complete failure.

One more example on the distancing assumption is worth noting. Obama began his administration determined to show how different he was from his predecessor, particularly because he felt the need to counter the impression that Bush had declared war on Islam -- an impression that Obama believed contributed to Al Qaeda's ability to recruit. Outreach to Muslims was one way to demonstrate a new day. Another was to signal differences with Israel. For Obama, this was especially important because he believed Bush's policy of no daylight with Israel had cost us with the Arabs. With this in mind, Obama consciously chose not to go to Israel after going to Cairo in June 2009 to give a speech designed to address the Arab-Muslim narrative. In the same vein, his tough posture on Israeli settlements aimed also to show he would be demanding of Israel. Ironically, for a president who wanted to elevate peacemaking between Israelis and Palestinians, he could not have adopted a worse approach: He gave the Arabs and Palestinians an excuse to do nothing until he delivered on the settlements freeze, and, in the process, he alienated the Israeli public who saw him seeking to reach out to Arabs and Muslims at Israel's expense. Losing the Israeli public makes it far easier for any Israeli prime minister to resist an American president.

Cooperating with Israel costs us with the Arabs

Those administrations that chose to cooperate with Israel did not lose with the Arabs. While I could cite many examples, the best relates to the decision to provide weapons to the Israelis for the first time. Kennedy was the first president to sell modern weapons to Israel -- the Hawk anti-aircraft missile, a purely defensive system. Kennedy's readiness to contemplate the sale triggered intense opposition within the administration, especially from the State Department and our ambassadors in Arab countries. The cables they sent in opposing the sale warned of a collapse of our position in the Middle East should we provide the Israelis arms. Secretary of State Dean Rusk argued that the sale would set a terrible precedent and cause grave damage to our relations with the Arabs. Kennedy, believing that too great an imbalance in arms would weaken Israel's deterrent and increase the prospects of war, overruled the opposition and proceeded with the sale.

As luck would have it for Rusk, the day the sale became publicly known happened to be the same day he was seeing Crown Prince Faisal of Saudi Arabia, the actual leader of the kingdom at the time. Did Faisal excoriate Rusk for the sale and tell him Saudi Arabia would have to reconsider its ties to the United States? No, the sale of arms to Israel did not worry him; he was preoccupied with the coup in Yemen that Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser had backed. He said Nasser was trying to establish a foothold on the Arabian Peninsula, and that this was a profound threat to Saudi Arabia. He asked for the U.S. to counter Nasser and provide arms and assurances to the kingdom. Rather than

walking away from the U.S., he wanted closer U.S. security ties. A week later, Faisal came to Washington to see Kennedy at the White House. His complaints were not about U.S. arms to Israel, they were about U.S. outreach to Egypt. Kennedy had approved an effort to improve ties with Egypt at the beginning of the administration and, to that end, had approved Public Law 480 (Food for Peace) funds to provide wheat to the Egyptians. At the time of this meeting, the U.S. was providing two-thirds of Egypt's bread supply, and Faisal complained that our economic assistance was freeing up resources for Nasser to use to threaten U.S. friends throughout the region. He argued that our outreach and assistance to Egypt was changing the balance of power in the Middle East and harming America's friends -- and we needed to stop what we were doing with Nasser and provide the Saudis and others more military support to secure them against Egypt's aggression in the region.

Sound familiar? Sound like what the Saudis, Emirates and other Arab leaders have been saying about the Obama administration's outreach to Iran for the last few years? It should. They used this argument against the Iran nuclear deal, complaining that the lifting of sanctions would provide the Iranians far more resources to fuel their threats throughout the region. At Obama's recent summit in Saudi Arabia with the Gulf Cooperation Council leaders, he heard complaints about Iranian aggression and our need to do far more to counter it. Israel was not on their minds, even as the Obama administration is negotiating a new 10-year Memorandum of Understanding with Israel on meeting its defense needs. Israel is not what preoccupies the Gulf Arab states today, Iran is.

And herein lies the fallacy of the assumption that cooperation with Israel will cost us with the Arabs -- or that distancing from Israel will benefit us with the Arabs: The priority of Arab leaders has always been their security and their survival. They look to the U.S. as the ultimate guarantor of their security. They have never made their relations with the United States dependent on our ties to Israel, because they need us for their security -- and they will not put that relationship at risk. They may not like Israel; they may have historically found their enemies in the region trying to use our ties with Israel against them; but Israel is not their security preoccupation, their regional rivals are, and that has been true since Nasser's time, in the 1950s. What matters to them is that the U.S. can be counted on for security and deterrent needs. Those Arab states that have traditionally been aligned with the U.S. are unsettled today because they feel less of a commitment to them -- and fear an American loss of interest in the Middle East -- under Obama. They worry whether this may be the wave of the future -- and the rhetoric of both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders worries them. It has produced one other irony: The scope of Arab security cooperation with Israel is unprecedented, even if it remains largely below the radar. Even as the Gulf Arab states and Egypt and Jordan wonder whether the U.S. will help meet their security needs as it has in the past, they see in Israel a bulwark against Iran and radical Islamist threats. This, too, reminds us of the shortcomings of the last assumption -- on the centrality of the Palestinian question.

The U.S. cannot transform its position in the Middle East, or transform the region itself, without solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

It may seem strange that someone so identified with trying to resolve this conflict would say this is a fallacious assumption. But I never focused on resolving this conflict because I thought it was a game-changer in the region. I thought it was important for Israelis and Palestinians; that it was and remains essential to ensure that Israel does not become a binational state; and that as a historic intractable conflict, settling it could send a message internationally that intractable conflicts could be resolved. In addition, I understood that ending it would permit us to deal with a conflict widely seen by Arab publics as a source of injustice.

But I never believed that if we removed this conflict, we would be removing the source of conflicts in the region. For those who saw Israel as a problem, and even for many in the bureaucracy who did not, the Palestinian issue was seen as the core of all Middle East conflicts. If there was ever a time where the fundamentally flawed nature of this assumption should be clear, it is now. After all, if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict magically was resolved tomorrow, it

would not stop one barrel bomb in Syria, roll back ISIS one meter, forge sectarian understandings in Iraq, stop the proxy war in Yemen, reduce Iran's ambitions in the region or make the Islamist insurgency in the Sinai against the Sisi regime in Egypt disappear.

None of this argues for not dealing with it. I have long argued that when there is no active diplomacy, a vacuum is created and filled by the worst forces. But the diplomacy should be informed by what is possible; if we cannot resolve the conflict now, given the gaps and the basic disbelief on both sides, we should focus on how we change the conditions on the ground and restore a sense of possibility. This is not the place to outline the steps needed to do so. It is the place to say that misreading this conflict as the core of the problems in the region has contributed to our misreading of the priorities of Arab leaders -- and contributed to our failing approach to the region.

I wrote *Doomed to Succeed* because I wanted the next administration to understand what we have gotten wrong in the region -- and to learn key lessons that should have been learned long ago. It would be an understatement to say this has been an unusual political year. Even with anger and retrenchment from international responsibilities being such a hallmark of the appeal of both Trump and Sanders, I remain doubtful that the American public truly feels we can withdraw from the Middle East -- or believes that its pathologies will stay there. The 9/11 attacks proved they will not, and we will be threatened. The fact that 94 percent of the American public is aware of the beheadings of Americans James Foley and Steven Sotloff indicates they are mindful of the threat ISIS poses. Time will tell whether a Trump candidacy, now that he seems assured the Republican nomination, will embody more traditional isolationist tendencies or will understand the value of allies. Hillary Clinton is certainly an internationalist who believes in the importance of power and its exercise.

Israelis have always understood one thing: A strong America is in Israel's interests. America is a force for good internationally. U.S. leadership is necessary, because effective coalitions don't form when we don't mobilize them. When we draw back, vacuums are created. Obama wanted to avoid what Bush had done in Iraq -- he was right to be leery of regime change, particularly when there are no plans for what comes afterward. That was the fundamental mistake in Iraq. We created the vacuum by removing the regime without a plan for what came next -- and the worst forces filled the void. In Syria, we did not replace the regime, but forces from within rose against it, and our hesitancy to be involved or support secular forces contributed to a vacuum that has produced a humanitarian catastrophe, a refugee crisis that endangered the European Union, and the rise of ISIS.

We can ill afford for new vacuums to emerge in the Middle East. Just as a strong America engaged in the Middle East is in Israel's interest, so, too, is a strong Israel in America's interests. That has probably never been more true than it is today, especially given the turmoil and terrible conflicts that characterize the Middle East. Unfortunately, these conflicts will not end soon. They are between radical Islamists -- Sunni and Shia -- and between radical Islamists and non-Islamists. In essence, they are about identity and who will control and shape it in the region.

In a Middle East that will be consumed by instability and unpredictability for the foreseeable future, Israel will stand in sharp contrast. It has problems -- with the Palestinians and domestically -- but it also has institutions and a rule of law and the means to cope with its problems; it is the only democracy in the area; it has shown extraordinary resiliency and is fundamentally stable. It is the strongest country in the region militarily. And it is, and will always be, an American ally whose basic orientation and support for the United States will not change.

At a time of great uncertainty in the Middle East, it is hard to believe that the next president of the United States will not recognize the value of such an American friend. That is one of the reasons I remain an optimist about the future of the U.S.-Israeli relationship, and why I titled the book "Doomed to Succeed."

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. Previously, he served as special assistant to President Obama and U.S. point man on the peace process in the George H. W. Bush and

Clinton administrations, among other posts. ❖

Jewish Journal

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

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)

TOPICS

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

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

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)