

# Misreading the Middle East, Again

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

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[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.



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**Ironically, most of the Sunni Arab states see Israel as a bulwark against Iran and the Islamic State, so emphasizing those security relationships and restoring the image of American reliability would make it easier to ask more of them on both fronts.**

It seems that in the Middle East everywhere one looks there is conflict and turmoil. The Arab state system itself is under assault. The Islamic State group challenges every Arab regime and rejects all Shias. For its part, Iran and its Shia proxies threaten the authority of Sunni-dominated Arab countries. Understanding the nature of the threats and what is, in truth, a struggle over who will define and shape the identity of the region is the first requirement for fashioning a successful strategy.

Interestingly, given the circumstances in the area, Israel will stand in stark contrast to the rest of the Middle East, and continue to be a natural partner for the United States. It is not just that Israel is the only democracy in the region. It is that Israel is the only country whose institutions and rule of law -- with elections where the loser accepts the outcome -- permit it to cope with its problems. Those problems, ranging from the conflict with the Palestinians to its Arab minority and secular-religious divide, are real. But because it is a genuine democracy, Israel has the wherewithal to adjust -- even if the adjustment often proves difficult to make.

It is harder to say that about other countries in the region. The American track-record in understanding the region -- and the countries in it -- is not great. In looking at the U.S.-Israeli relationship under presidents Harry Truman through Barack Obama in [my new book, \*Doomed to Succeed\*, \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/doomed-to-succeed\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/doomed-to-succeed) it became apparent that in every administration three interrelated assumptions were embedded in the national security apparatus. First, if we distanced from Israel we would gain with the Arabs. Second, if we cooperated with Israel, we would lose with the Arabs. And third, if we wanted to transform

our position in the region -- and transform the region itself, we needed to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. All three of these assumptions were fundamentally flawed.

As for the first, the Eisenhower, Nixon, Carter, Bush 41 and Obama administrations all distanced from Israel, expecting Arab responsiveness. None responded favorably to our distancing. Nixon went so far as to suspend the sale of F-4 Phantom planes to Israel in March of 1970 hoping that Egypt's then-president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, would respond. What made the Nixon gesture all the more remarkable is that he suspended the aircraft at the very moment the Soviet Union, for the first time in its history, was deploying its military personnel outside the Soviet bloc to Egypt. Nasser's response to Nixon was to increase his demands that we do more to cut Israel off.

The assumption that cooperation with Israel would cost us with the Arabs was just as off-base. President John Kennedy's administration was the first to provide modern weapons to Israel. He faced real opposition within his administration to doing so, with his secretary of state, Dean Rusk, arguing that to provide arms to Israel would set a terrible precedent and cause us grave damage with the Arabs. Yet when he met with Saudi Crown Prince Faisal the same day that the news of the sale leaked out, Faisal was focused on the coup in Yemen backed by Nasser, not our weapons to Israel. This, he said, posed a threat to Saudi Arabia and it needed U.S. arms and assurances. A week later, when Faisal met Kennedy, Faisal's focus remained on Egypt, not Israel, and he argued that our outreach and economic assistance to Egypt constituted a threat to the region: It was freeing up Egyptian resources to threaten U.S. friends and shift the regional balance of power against Saudi Arabia and the other western-oriented states in the Middle East. Once again, Faisal asked for U.S. arms and commitment to Saudi security.

History does have a way of repeating itself, and the arguments that Faisal made to Kennedy are the same ones that first King Abdullah and now King Salman of Saudi Arabia have made to President Obama about Iran. The Saudis and the other Gulf Arab states have repeatedly emphasized their concerns about the Obama administration's outreach to Iran and the consequences of the sanctions relief that will result from the Iran nuclear deal. Once again, the Saudis fear that a country they define as a regional trouble-maker -- in the 1960s Egypt, today Iran -- is going to benefit from our outreach.

What emerges from these examples, and others I outline in going through each administration, is that we have consistently misread the priorities of Arab leaders. It is not Israel; it is instead their security and survival. Regional rivals constitute the threats that they are preoccupied with, and they count on us to be the guarantor of security. Given that, they will never make their relationship with us dependent on our relationship with Israel.

In fact, it is our reliability that matters to them. If they perceive us as less reliable -- which, fairly or not, they do today -- that is what will affect their ties and responsiveness to us. And here we see the flaw in the last of the assumptions, the centrality of the Palestinian conflict to the region and our position in it. Most Arab leaders don't see it fundamentally affecting their security.

That does not mean they are indifferent to the Palestinian conflict. They know that it historically has resonated with their publics as an issue of injustice that needs to be righted. But today it tends to take a backseat with Arab publics to other conflicts -- the Syrian civil war and the threats from the Islamic State group and Iran.

So what does all this mean for U.S. policymakers? For starters, we need a clear concept guiding our strategy. It is natural that defeating the Islamic State group would seem to be our priority, but for that we need the Sunni states -- only the Sunni states and tribes can discredit the Islamic State. That rules out partnering with Bashar Assad or the Iranians in Syria even as we seek to build our collective leverage on the ground to shape a political process that at some point can bring that civil war to an end.

Ironically, today most of the Arab Sunni states see Israel as a bulwark against both the Iranians and the Islamic State and groups claiming loyalty to it. While they may keep their cooperation largely private -- given public sensitivities

about the Palestinian issue -- the scope of what Israel is now doing with a number of Arab states on security is unprecedented. That is one area we should emphasize, particularly given the value it would have in convincing our traditional friends in the region that we understand the threats that worry them most. Demonstrating that, and restoring the image of American reliability, will make it easier to ask more of our regional partners in countering the Islamic State group and Iran's destabilizing actions in the region. Ultimately, debunking assumptions that have misled us in the region is a must for any strategy to be successful.

*Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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