

## Israel, America, and a Churning Middle East (Part II)

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

Feb 12, 2014

### 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.



Brief Analysis

**O**n February 4, 2014, Ambassador Dennis Ross addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute after participating in the Institute for National Security Studies annual conference in Tel Aviv. He was joined by Washington Institute executive director Robert Satloff and former national security advisor Stephen Hadley. The following is a rapporteur's summary of Ross's remarks; Satloff's observations were published as [PolicyWatch 2204 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/assessing-u.s.-strategy-in-the-israeli-palestinian-talks-a-trip-report\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/assessing-u.s.-strategy-in-the-israeli-palestinian-talks-a-trip-report), and Hadley's as [PolicyWatch 2206 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israel-america-and-a-churning-middle-east-a-trip-report\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israel-america-and-a-churning-middle-east-a-trip-report).

### CAN ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN NEGOTIATIONS SUCCEED?

**T**here are several reasons to believe Secretary of State John Kerry can produce progress toward peace. First, while Israelis are focused on the Palestinian issue, no one else in the region is paying much attention. This creates political space for both sides. Second, Egypt has decapitated the Muslim Brotherhood, leaving Hamas dramatically weakened and enhancing President Mahmoud Abbas's ability to make decisions on peace. Third, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is making clear that Israel will not become a binational state -- suggesting that his country runs the risk of losing its Jewish character if it does nothing. Fourth, Secretary Kerry is acting with a great deal of energy and working with both sides in a way that has made them reluctant to say no. That does not mean an agreement is in the offing, but it does increase the possibility that something may be achieved.

### THE ROLE OF AN AMERICAN FRAMEWORK

**I**srael and the Palestinians are anticipating an American document at some point establishing a framework for negotiations. Secretary Kerry has first sought to engage with the parties to get a sense of what might be acceptable, even if they retain some reservations. He will then provide a basis or set of guidelines for talks on permanent-status issues. These guidelines would be designed to shrink the gaps between the two sides regarding borders, security, refugees, and Jerusalem, providing direction on how those core issues might be resolved.

A key challenge that must be addressed is public skepticism on both sides. Currently, a contradiction exists: majorities on each side support a two-state outcome (though Palestinian support may be waning), even as

overwhelming majorities believe it cannot be achieved. In other words, if the framework is not accompanied by major practical changes on the ground from both sides, it is unlikely to be as compelling as it needs to be.

## **BENEFITS OF SUCCESS**

**H**istorically, many have believed that Israeli-Palestinian peace was the key to solving the region's wider problems.

While that notion was never true, it should be obvious today that an Israeli-Palestinian agreement would have no effect on the horrendous civil war in Syria, the struggle in Egypt, or Iran's impulse to pursue its nuclear program.

Nevertheless, peace -- or even meaningful progress -- between Israel and the Palestinians would be important in its own right and could remove an enduring sense of grievance that resonates throughout the region. In addition, there is value in showing that even an intractable conflict like this one can be resolved or ameliorated. And for Washington, there is an increasingly important need to demonstrate effectiveness at a time when many in the region are doubting American power and convincing themselves that the United States is withdrawing from the Middle East.

## **REGIONAL FEARS OF U.S. RETRENCHMENT**

**O**bservers throughout the region, particularly in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel, have increasingly adopted a common mantra of U.S. retrenchment. It is widely believed that America's adversaries are actively changing the balance of power against America's friends -- and against America's interests -- while Washington is doing little about it. Proponents of this view cite Iran, Syria, and Egypt as examples of U.S. hesitancy to act in the face of challenges or recognize the existential struggle that some friends are facing.

More than anything else, Washington's failure to act when its redline was breached on Syrian chemical weapons has affected regional perceptions of the Obama administration and fostered an apparent crisis in confidence. The administration's argument -- that its diplomatic initiative achieved the objectives of its redline, which was always to prevent the use of chemical weapons -- falls on deaf ears. Instead, the administration is seen as having failed to follow through on its commitments, raising questions about its willingness to use American power to back its friends.

Another theme has emerged in which the administration is out to pursue a grand bargain with Iran. The Saudis see such an agreement coming at their expense, while many Israelis see it as guided by a desire to avoid conflict at any cost. All of these aspects are seen as part of the overall U.S. retreat from the Middle East.

The administration is not indifferent to this trend, and U.S. officials have been addressing it. At the World Economic Forum in Davos and the Munich Security Conference, Secretary Kerry insisted that the United States is not withdrawing, pointing to active American diplomacy in the region. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel offered similar arguments in Munich, pointing to America's 40,000 military personnel in the area and its ongoing commitment to promote a regional security structure geared toward protection of critical infrastructure, maritime and missile defense, and early warning. For his part, the president is planning a trip to Saudi Arabia, no doubt recognizing the need to offer reassurances about U.S. commitments and interests in the area.

While these steps are useful, additional measures are needed given the deep doubts being expressed around the region. To change these perceptions, the United States should do the following:

**1. Conduct systematic strategic dialogues with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel.** While Washington has regular consultations with these allies already, most of the conversations are focused on specific issues -- they do not involve senior officials coming together to discuss the wide array of regional challenges and how they may or may not fit together. Washington should tell its regional allies that it shares their objectives: it doesn't want Egypt to be a failed state; it doesn't want Bashar al-Assad or Iran's Qods Force to win in Syria, or al-Qaeda to embed itself there; and it

doesn't want Iran to be a nuclear weapons state. In focused discussions with these allies, the administration could explore how to concretely maximize areas of agreement, minimize areas of disagreement, and shape concerted actions accordingly.

**2. Show that America is prepared to compete.** Many in the region believe Washington is so inclined to avoid conflict that it is not prepared to compete with Iran or Russia. The administration does not share that perception; it sees itself as already competing. It must therefore convince allies that the regional perception is untrue -- not with words, but with actions. This will be especially important during President Obama's trip to Saudi Arabia.

**3. Work with the Saudis to coordinate a strategy on Egypt.** Washington and Riyadh share the common objective of not only preventing Egypt from failing, but also seeing the country become economically stable. Riyadh does not want to be Cairo's banker forever; its interests would be better served if Egypt's tourism industry recovers and foreign investment reemerges. Going forward, Washington can emphasize that it is not cutting Egypt off and will continue to provide it with much needed counterterrorism support. The administration should also make clear that if the Saudis continue providing massive economic support to Cairo, they should do so in a way that supports the Egyptians in making the internal decisions they need to make. Currently, Egypt is not making decisions on its economy and is therefore not moving forward in any respect.

**4. Demonstrate that the sanctions regime is still intact.** Israelis are concerned that the interim agreement with Iran will lead to market psychology taking over and the sanctions collapsing under their own weight. If that happens, Tehran wins by default. One way to prevent this scenario -- while remaining within the bounds of the Joint Plan of Action with Iran -- is to issue more designations to demonstrate that the sanctions regime is intact.

Although business delegations have been visiting Iran of late, no major deals are being struck. Washington will have to keep an eye on two things: whether any deals are actually reached, and whether the sale of Iranian oil begins to exceed 1 million barrels per day. If oil sales stay constant, then the sanctions regime is intact. If either of these indicators changes, then Washington will be facing a different situation.

**5. Reassure allies that Washington is not simply accepting Iran's subversive activities in the region.** The administration should do everything it can to demonstrate that the United States is not acquiescing to Iranian efforts to change the regional balance of power. For example, actively disrupting Iranian arms supply routes to the Houthis in Yemen is within Washington's means and would send a very clear signal in an area that matters greatly to the Saudis.

**6. Identify and provide meaningful lethal assistance to Syrian opposition factions that are prepared to fight al-Qaeda, much as Washington did with the Awakening Councils in Iraq in 2007.** Syria has the biggest potential to make a difference in regional perceptions of the United States. At a time when Iran and Russia continue to back the Assad regime militarily, the administration's reluctance to act has reinforced the image of U.S. passivity. Yet Washington should have its own concerns about the strategic implications of the war's new direction. Al-Qaeda groups are increasingly embedded in Syria, and as long as Assad is there, the country will remain a magnet for jihadists worldwide. If America maintains its current posture, it will be only a matter of time before al-Qaeda establishes itself further there. In that scenario, the group will not remain content with fighting the regime -- it will also use Syria as a base to plan and carry out attacks elsewhere. Today, the United States carries out drone strikes in Yemen targeting al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. There will come a point when Syria represents the same kind of threat, and when that happens, Washington will need to do more than it is doing now. In countering this threat, it will also have an opportunity to affect the balance of power in Syria.

In some parts of Syria, we are seeing the equivalent of we saw with the Awakening Councils in Iraq in 2007.

Supporting those willing to fight al-Qaeda was the smart thing to do then, and Washington should do the same today

in Syria. Some might suggest siding with the regime to counter al-Qaeda, but that would only empower the group, not discredit it. Instead, the administration should back the secular opposition forces and relatively moderate Islamists that are prepared to fight the group. If Washington already knows it is headed toward taking action to prevent al-Qaeda from embedding itself in Syria, it should support these forces now.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Harry Reis. ❖*

---

## 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 & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

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

[Energy & Economics \(/policy-analysis/energy-economics\)](/policy-analysis/energy-economics)

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](/policy-analysis/us-policy)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Egypt \(/policy-analysis/egypt\)](/policy-analysis/egypt)

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](/policy-analysis/iran)

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](/policy-analysis/palestinians)

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](/policy-analysis/gulf-states)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)