

# Interview: Dennis Ross on Iran, Peace Process, Egypt

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

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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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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**On Tuesday 12 June, Ambassador Dennis Ross was interviewed by BICOM senior research fellow Professor Alan Johnson. The interview covered key policy issues facing Britain, Israel and the United States. The following is a transcript of their discussion.**

## PART I: IRAN

**J**OHNSON: Let's begin with Iran. The outcome of the two rounds of talks between Iran and the P5+1 have been disappointing. It doesn't seem that sanctions have yet succeeded in getting Iran to rethink its policies. Can sanctions and diplomacy still work?

DENNIS ROSS: Well, I think that they can still work. We have to put this in some perspective. Sanctions alone were never going to move Iranians; they had to be part of a larger approach in which Iranians saw that the price to them was going up. The economic sanctions are clearly one manifestation of that price. And there is no doubt that the Iranians are feeling it. Their currency has been devalued by more than half; they can't sell as much as a million barrels of their oil per day. They are in a position where they have to put oil on tankers and they have run out of tankers. You look at the state of their energy infrastructure and it needs a massive influx of capital and technology. Everywhere you look from their standpoint they are feeling the pain economically in a way that is much more significant than before. But the fact is it takes time for that to have an effect on them.

You have to look at the pressure [they are under] not just in terms of the economics but the political isolation. And also they have to see that while we want diplomacy to succeed, this is their last chance to have it succeed. If they don't approach it with a greater sense of urgency that they may well see that the end result will be the use of force against them. One doesn't want to see that as the outcome but the fact is that the Iranians have to come to believe that the price is going to continue to go up and that if diplomacy fails then the price gets worse for them.

JOHNSON: How could we make the price go up? What could be done to increase the pressure on Iran?

ROSS: Well, I think the key to increasing the pressure on them is for them to understand that first, we are not afraid

of diplomacy failing. I think they have come to these talks now and they feel... the six are sufficiently anxious to have diplomacy succeed that now they can -- even though they pay a price because of the economic pressures going up -- they feel that by playing for time it actually serves their interest, and it makes the six more likely to, at some point, be prepared to ease the pressures on them if they take minimal steps. And they have to be disabused of that. And they also have to see that while we are prepared for a serious approach, we are going to have to see a manifestation of their seriousness. This approach to diplomacy is not open-ended; at some point we will call a halt to it. They [should] understand that if [they] adopt a posture where they just keep talking and there are no results, that sooner or later that is not going to be the case. And when it is not the case they are subjecting themselves to other means, including the use of force.

JOHNSON: There has been much talk of differences between the USA and Israel on either's estimates of timetables -- 'zones of immunity' and so on. How do you currently read that relationship as regards the Iranian question?

ROSS: Well, on the one hand there is a great deal of convergence between the US and Israel. There is convergence on the objective, which is prevention; not containment, not 'living with'. There is convergence on the preferred means on resolving this, which is by diplomatic means. The very concept of 'crippling sanctions' was an Israeli concept, so that reflects an Israeli view that the best way to do this is through diplomatic means and that with the right amount of pressure you can affect Iranian behaviour.

There is a practical reality that explains a difference. For Israel, the time period for when it could lose a military option comes much sooner than it does for the United States. And Israel will look at the diplomacy and feel that negotiations could be stretched to the point where they go beyond that time when Israel would still have a military option. For Israel to face an existential threat -- and only recently we heard the head of the Iranian military again talking about the objective of annihilating Israel, so this is not an abstraction for the Israelis -- and not have a military option to deal with it goes against the very grain of Israel, against the very ethos of Israel. That point arrives earlier for the Israelis and they want to be sure that diplomacy takes that into account. For the United States there is no doubt that we have more time. But the President of the United States has made it very clear that there is a diplomatic window, but it's closing. So the nature of the gap in time may not be as pronounced as some people feel.

## **PART II: THE PEACE PROCESS**

**J** OHNSON: Let's turn to the peace process. Do you think that change in the composition of the Israeli government creates new opportunities to move forward in the peace process?

ROSS: Well, whether it creates new opportunities or not, one thing is clear: the Prime Minister of Israel [recently] made a statement that he had not made in his previous government, that in my mind is quite significant. He talked about peace with the Palestinians being in the strategic interest of Israel. In other words peace is not a favour that Israel does for the Palestinians; it is something that reflects a strategic interest and need of Israel. He also said that Israel cannot become a bi-national state. When he says that what he is saying is, he understands that there is a demographic trend and therefore it is important to see if you can reach an agreement. This suggests he is not just mouthing the words of wanting to pursue peace. He sees that there is a reason that Israel needs to pursue it for its own interest.

Now can that lead to something? A lot depends on Israel. It depends [also] on the Palestinians. Are the Palestinians open? Where is Abu Mazen, right now? In the past weeks there have been direct channels between the two sides. It's not clear at this point that there is an opening; but I hope that there is, and we will have to see if it can be pursued. There is no doubt that the Prime Minister of Israel is sending a signal. Where is Abu Mazen at this point? I think that remains to be seen.

JOHNSON: There has been a lot of talk recently [in Israel], from left and right, about the notion of 'constructive

unilateralism' and in large part it is fuelled by that horizon of the bi-national state. You have written yourself about the possibility of taking incremental steps in areas A, B and C [in the West Bank]. Are we looking at a major shift in thinking from the 'peace process' model to something like the 'constructive unilateralism' model, or some combination of the two. How do you see that debate?

ROSS: I've never been a fan of unilateralism... [Unilateralism] tends not to promote a sense of mutual responsibility. Peace in the end is going to come from agreements. It's going to come from unilateral steps. Unilateralism in the past was something that tended to benefit extremes. When Israel withdrew unilaterally from Lebanon, Hezbollah was seen as the great victor. When Israel withdrew unilaterally from Gaza, Hamas was seen as the great victor. Those who believe in co-existence haven't been the ones who have benefitted from unilateralism. That said, what unilateralism also demonstrates -- and that's what I think [is] the significance of saying that 'Israel will not become a bi-national state' -- is that Israel would prefer to negotiate something. But if they can't negotiate something it will take a unilateral step...

I would use a different term. I would say 'coordinated unilateralism.' If it is difficult for each side to make concessions for the others because the psychology of the pursuit of peace has changed right now. The publics on each side basically disbelieve. And in a context of disbelief it becomes harder and harder for leaders to make concessions to the other side. The question is can they take unilateral steps that they define as being in their own interest and can those be coordinated? And can that be used to infuse life into a political process?

JOHNSON: What do you think? Do you think that is possible?

ROSS: Yes. I still would prefer not to have unilateralism. For me this is a fall back not the preference. But I myself have talked about a hybrid model where you still pursue a political process but to invest that political process with life, to give it new meaning, to give it new credibility, to give publics on each side a reason to take a second look you could see steps being taken, preferably by each side. Now maybe those steps can be co-ordinated. Maybe they can be quietly brokered between the two sides. Maybe they don't have to be presented as if they are being done because they are a favour to the other side. They are being done because they reflect the interest of each side. I do think it is conceivable that you could use these kinds of steps as a way to try and create some new momentum and new credibility in a political process that at this point doesn't have much saliency for either Israeli publics or Palestinian publics.

When you look at polling on each side its quite striking. You still have strong majorities on each side that believe in a two-state outcome, and those same majorities on each side don't believe it will ever take place. So something has to happen to convince them that this is for real.

## **PART III: EGYPT**

**J**OHNSON: One of the reasons for the hesitancy around unilateralism is the changing regional environment in which Israel finds itself. There are serious concerns about the political direction of Egypt. Whatever the outcome of the presidential election, Islamists are going to be playing a significant role in the country's future. I was recently in Doha at the US-Islamic World Forum, and to me it seemed plain that there is a new 'pitch' from the Muslim Brotherhood to America is 'Come on, you have to look again at this relationship you have with Israel. We are main players now, we have been elected, and you have to give us more respect.' What leverage do you think western states have with those new political actors? How should they use that leverage in order to moderate the political trajectory of those forces?

ROSS: I think what's important is to recognise that they have needs. In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood is going to dominate the Parliament. That's a fact, a given. And there is certainly the potential -- many might say the likelihood -- that you are also going to have a Muslim Brotherhood President as well. Now when you are in that position, and

you're the Muslim Brothers, you can't escape responsibility. Now it's up to you to deal with Egypt's economic problems. The sense of no possibility for the future is what produced a lot of the pressure for change to begin with. The Muslim Brotherhood has created an image of itself that it is not corrupt, that it is effective and that it will deal with problems. Well, it never had the responsibility. Now it has the responsibility.

It is going to need help from the outside. It should get help from the outside if it is prepared to respect certain basic rules. Does it respect its international obligations including its peace treaty with Israel? If it's suddenly going to suddenly call for a referendum on peace -- when it knows it can orchestrate an outcome which is hostile to that -- well, it shouldn't expect that it is going to get any help because then it is not respecting its international obligations. If it's not prepared to respect the rights of minorities, it shouldn't assume that it is going to get help. If it's not going to respect the rights of women, the same. If it's going to deny political space for competition, so that you can't have a repeat of elections, it should not assume it is going to get help. By the same token if it's prepared to respect its international obligations, if it's prepared to respect the rights of minorities, if it respects the rights of plurality, then it should get help. The response of the US, the Europeans and others to the [election of the] Muslim Brotherhood should be a function of: are they prepared to respect basic international norms and basic international rules? If they are, then they should get help.

They have the right to make their choices. Egypt will make its choices. The United States is not going to determine Egypt's future. The Egyptian people will determine Egypt's future. If the Muslim Brotherhood is elected that's the choice of the Egyptian people and that can be respected. But we have our choices too. If they are going to violate their international obligations they are not going to get help. If they going to live up to their international obligations, that's a different story. Their behaviour should determine whether we are prepared to be supportive and provide financial help. It is a very difficult financial environment for the Europeans and for the the United States, and yet we have a stake in Egypt and we have a stake in what Egypt does. Egypt is an important player in the region. Is Egypt still going to be a contributor to peace? Is Egypt going to fight terror? Is Egypt going to try and enhance the stability of the region? At the end of the day, what happens in Egypt matters to all of us.

JOHNSON: Talking to some young Egyptian civil rights activists in Doha last week they were saying that first elections after a period of autocracy are often won by religious forces: people vote identity. The important thing, they said, is that we get to a second election which is about record: have they delivered. What they want most from the international community is to hold the political space open in Egypt so they reach a genuine second election, a third election and so on.

ROSS: I guess I was saying the same thing, in a different way. What I think the international community needs to do right now -- even before the elections -- is to begin this process of emphasising certain standards of accountability. ❖

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