

# Dennis Ross: Political Solution Still Possible with Iran

by [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.

**A**s world powers make their way to Baghdad for another meeting with Iran in an attempt to resolve the nuclear standoff, former US negotiator Dennis Ross tells Al-Hayat that a political solution is still possible on the issue. Ross, who closely worked on the Iranian file in the last three years at the White House, talks about an Israeli seriousness in mulling the use of force if diplomacy fails to achieve a breakthrough. On Syria, he cautions of a collapse in the central authority if the stalemate continues, and emphasizes the need for outreach from Saudi Arabia to Syria's Allawites.

Al-Hayat correspondent Joyce Karam met Ross at his office at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and following is the Q and A.

## Iran

**What would constitute success for the P5+1 meeting with Iran in Baghdad this week?**

I don't view this meeting as make or break meeting. What needs to happen is the talks becoming more ongoing and systematic. Meeting once a month makes the prospect of producing something or determining whether a deal is possible is quite low. There is a need to intensify the nature of the talks, where it would put both sides in a position where there is more ongoing work, where you can create an agenda, with a follow up and deal with a set of issues like confidence builders, transparency measures, judicial protocol, interpretation and implementation.

**-The time element that you are talking about. There are regional concerns that Iran might use the negotiations to buy time, how much time is there at hand? What needs to be achieved at those negotiations to stop the clock?**

If we have the process that am suggesting (more systematic meetings), we'd be in a better position to know whether this will lead somewhere or not. In the past when proposals were made to the Iranians, it took them very long to respond. If you're not going to have weekly meetings, it becomes harder to determine whether it will produce an outcome, and this plays into this fear that the talks become a rope-a-dope and stretches on while Iran continues to enrich.

**-Do you think the parallel track of sanctions should continue even as talks are ongoing?**

Yes, as long as Iran continues to enrich they can't assume that sanctions will stop.

**-Do you think a deal can be reached with Iran?**

I think Iran is open to a deal because it is under a lot of pressure. They want to reduce the pressure and that has been the pattern with them. There is a possibility for a deal, because the context has been created, they are isolated internationally, the balance of power in the region is shifting against them, and the economic price they're paying is a terrible one.

**-You worked on Iran policy in the Obama administration, do you think it's determined in stopping Iran from obtaining nuclear weapon, or can the US coexist with such an outcome?**

The President has been very clear; he has laid out his objective which is prevention and not containment. This was an issue that had been considered and the President made a decision.

**-If all diplomatic measures fail, do you think Obama would execute the military option?**

Yes, in that interview he gave to Jeffrey Goldberg, where he said I don't bluff, that was a message to the Iranians, they shouldn't mistake it. Obama means what he says, he would like it to be a diplomatic outcome, and it is in Iran's interest to have such an outcome. If what the Iranians want is civil nuclear power, they can have that, what they can not have is break out capability. They can not have the ability to take that and turn it into nuclear weapon.

**-Would such deal prevent nuclear arms in the region?**

They can only have civil nuclear power, which means they can't convert into nuclear weapon. There are two ways to do that. Either they don't enrich and get the fuel from an international fuel bank. Or they have very limited enrichment capability. Those are two analytical alternatives: one which is best for non-proliferation (if they don't enrich), and they can't reprocess, they have light water reactors, that's the best from standpoint of ensuring this doesn't become a model for everyone else. As an alternative, if they were to have limited enrichment, it'll be limited in what percent they can enrich too. It has to be very low.

**-How low?**

3.5 percent. I am not advocating this as an outcome, but from an analytical standpoint there are these two ways to try to prevent a break out capability.

**-Do you think Israel and other regional players would accept such an outcome?**

The clearer it is that you have firewalls in place, real transparency, the more credible it becomes. There is no question that the preference is for no enrichment.

**-What is your assessment of the Israeli position today, do you fear an Israeli unilateral strike on Iran?**

I believe the Israelis are quite serious about their readiness to use force if diplomacy fails. But I also believe that the US is quite ready to use force if diplomacy fails.

**-Do you see Israel and the US on the same stream of thought about this today?**

The truth is the Israelis don't have as much time as we would have to test diplomacy. From their standpoint the Iranians continue to enrich, that's why sanctions should continue unless they stop enrichment. In the Israeli case, they worry about losing their military option at a certain point or lose the effectiveness of it. When (Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu went back to Israel he said time for action is not measured in days and weeks nor in years, between days and years you have a space, there is a window but it's closing.

**-The new Israeli government, we have 3 generals, is this a war government?**

It certainly is a government that is capable of making big decisions, whether on national security use of force or making peace.

# Peace Process

## **On resuming the peace process, is there any real chance for this today?**

First you have an Israeli government that is more capable of making big decisions and that includes peace. It takes both sides to be able to move forward, but this is definitely an Israeli government that can contemplate some steps that the previous government would have found more difficult for political reasons to carry out.

## **-Looking back, at the past four years, what happened? Obama showed early interest in reviving the peace process, but why did it collapse?**

People always want to look at what the United States could have done differently. The US can not make peace, the two parties have to make it happen. The US can help but we are not a substitute for what they must do. I think you got into a situation where Abu Mazen (Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas) made a judgment that the Israeli government was unlikely to be able to make peace and he saw a high cost going into negotiations that wouldn't lead anywhere. Instead, he imposed conditions, that had not been imposed on any previous Israeli government, and Netanyahu said why should i pay a price that none of my predecessors had paid.

Now you might have some potential for change, there is a broad based Israeli government, it is a center to right rather than right to center, maybe Abu Mazen will look at it differently. Now we had an exchange of letters between the two sides, more important is that there is a vehicle of communication between the two.

There is still a public context that makes it tough for both leaders. Both Israeli and Palestinian publics have come to a point where they don't believe the other side is serious about a two state approach, and that makes it harder for leaders to take steps towards a productive direction. I would like to see both sides thinking what steps they are able to take to show that they are committed to a two state outcome.

## **-Do you see the Obama administration doing anything before the elections?**

I think the US will continue to work. The US helped in facilitating the letters. and will continue in such efforts.

## **-How does the Arab spring influence the peace efforts?**

There is a paradox here. On the one hand, the rise of the Muslim brotherhood creates a chilling effect on both sides. For Abu Mazen it puts him in a situation where if he's seen he is making compromises for peace, it can create a backlash. For PM Netanyahu, he looks at all the uncertainty around him and says even if he makes steps, will he be exposing himself to greater risk, what are the consequences.

The paradox is, while what i described is true, it is also true that the Muslim brotherhood and others through out the Arab countries are internally preoccupied, that it creates more freedom to Abu Mazen and PM Netanyahu. Yes, the context is that there is greater uncertainty, but that is also related to great internal preoccupations, which creates a certain space for both sides to do something now.

## **-There is a great deal of suspicion about Netanyahu himself in Arab world and about his readiness to make peace. You've known him for some time, and worked with him on the Hebron agreement. What is your perspective on this?**

My perspective is all sorts of both sides tries to makes assertions of what other side won't do. I'd rather see everyone test the proposition. PM Netanyahu says he wants to make peace, and it would be smart to test that proposition.

# SYRIA

## **The situation in Syria is deteriorating; do you expect this to be a long conflict?**

One hopes not, but (Syrian President Bashar) Assad is a purely sectarian leader, he is not a national leader. He faced

a purely peaceful uprising by becoming a strictly sectarian leader. He is trying to create the equation with the Alawite minority that their survival depends on his, and the truth is he is the one who puts their survival at greatest risk. He is the one who guarantees the increasing prospect of enduring civil war, who threatens to make the sectarian divide one that is irreparable.

It is important not only for Syrian opposition but also for Saudis, and others to reach out to the Alawites. They can offer assurances and guarantees against vendettas, and against an exclusive sectarian future. They can also make clear that they support an opposition that is inclusive and not exclusive. Saudis have lot of reasons to do that, they want to see a Syria that is stable and not a Syria that is torn apart. It would help if the Saudis and others sent that message directly and not only publicly, they have all sorts of channels and should use them.

### **-What would be the tipping point in Syria?**

The economic situation for the Assad regime is bad, and the reserves are running low. The sanctions will get worse and not better, while the Iranians have their own economic woes. The tipping point comes when it becomes increasingly clear that Assad is a threat to the survival of Syria. What stayed in tact is the core of security establishment, but he has to use the same forces and shift them around. He imprisoned and killed lot of people and the opposition to him doesn't go away. So the tipping point comes when those who are on the fence or supporting him see that he cant continue to finance them.

### **-What does Russia want in Syria?**

I think, the Russians at this point may believe that he (Assad) can still survive. The tipping point has to affect them too. It will also come in them seeing the opposition is more coherent, that it won't go away, that there are fissures within the Assad base, and that's why it's important to reach out to the Alawites. Arabs have to be very clear with Russians and say: you can have a relationship with Bashar or have a relationship with us but not both.

If the Russians want to produce a Yemen style exit for Assad, the US should welcome it.

### **-Can Assad survive this?**

No. It's a regime that depends upon coercion, and keeps applying it with no limitation. The fear has been lost and the anger trumps the fear. He has killed too many people and there will never be reconciliation with him. The money will run out, and when it becomes clearer that he cannot provide it, this is unsustainable. It is very important to try to accelerate the process, for the sake of Syria and its future.

The longer it drags on the greater the danger is. It's not just civil war, this is already in place. The greater danger is the possibility of the central authority breaking down, and if the institutions of state break down, the sectarian divide become so deep that it can't be repaired. No one wants to see Syria a failed state.

### **-But doesn't this bring the question of military option to prevent a failed state?**

The military option gives no guarantees. But I do think the military option needs to be considered. Part of creating a tipping point is conveying to those who still back Assad that he doesn't have an insurance policy against such intervention. There has to be multiple steps taken that reinforce each other at same time, there is not one step that will produce the escalation.

### **-Do you think Assad should still be able to exit?**

Assad would be smart to leave at a point when he has opportunity to do so. Time is not on his side. ❖

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