

How to Have Successful Negotiations

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

May 27, 2008

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

President Bush evoked considerable controversy when he compared those who call for talks with "terrorists and radicals" to Nazi appeasers. Making such a charge in the Israeli Knesset, where the lessons of the Holocaust inform every Israeli leader, was bound to give it a special weight and attention.

While some thought the president had Barack Obama in mind because of his readiness to talk to Iran and Syria, his words could more appropriately be applied to John McCain's reaction to Hamas's election victory in 2006. At that time, Sen. McCain felt that Hamas should be engaged because the election indicated it was a reality that had to be dealt with.

To be sure, Mr. McCain no longer calls for such engagement, and has adopted a tough posture toward Hamas. But many well-known national security figures -- Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski to name but two -- believe that such negotiations are needed.

No doubt we will see many skirmishes over national security issues in the fall campaign. Some will revolve around slogans, and some will involve the substance of foreign policy. Deciding with whom we should or should not be negotiating is a real, substantive issue. It ought to be debated.

A basic tool of statecraft, negotiations are used in every facet of foreign policy: to prevent conflict, to conclude hot or cold wars, to reconcile with former enemies, to build coalitions against possible aggressors, to mobilize donor efforts for reconstruction after conflicts or natural disasters, to forge or alter trade agreements, to persuade others to transform their behavior, and so on.

Negotiations certainly can be treated as a reward for those whose behavior one wants to change -- and that is basically the way the Bush administration has approached them with adversaries. But if you approach negotiations this way, it means denying yourself a basic means to alter the behavior of others.

It also means denying yourself a basic tool to learn about those whose behavior you want to change. Direct talks offer a window into the psychic and political world of others -- their aims, wants, needs and fears, as well as their readiness and capability to change.

As a longtime negotiator involved with the Middle East and on arms control, some may say that I have a natural bias

for talking. I do -- to the extent that I believe it is a mistake for any administration to deny itself this basic tool of the trade.

That does not mean, however, that we should talk in any and all circumstances. At a minimum, we need to draw a basic distinction between states and nonstate actors. I say this as someone who has negotiated with both.

Nation states typically have a certain standing on the world stage. When we choose not to talk to them, as the Bush administration has done on Iran, and did for a long time on North Korea, we are not eroding their legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. Instead, we tend to make our unwillingness to talk the issue. We should want their egregious behaviors to be the focal point internationally, not our rejection of negotiations.

For nonstate actors like Hamas and Hezbollah, the circumstances are different. They don't have standing internationally. They seek legitimacy on the world stage to prove the "inevitability" of their agenda and their goals. For me, it was a given that Hamas would say, as its spokesmen quickly did, that Jimmy Carter's meetings with its leaders lent greater "legitimacy" to the group.

If achieving legitimacy is so important to them -- if proving that they don't need to adjust to the world, but proving that the world must adjust to them is such a central aim of theirs -- then it is essential that they not get something for nothing. They should be required to meet certain conditions before we negotiate with them.

Clearly, states like Iran want something from us as well, and in negotiations we can decide to provide it or withhold it. But their standing is simply not in question in the same way.

Moreover, our willingness to talk, paradoxically, makes it easier to adopt a tougher policy toward Iran if the Iranians are nonresponsive. No one can accuse us of seeking only a military answer when we demonstrate that we are prepared to engage in good-faith negotiations.

In all likelihood, whoever is president next year will enter direct talks with Iran: Sen. McCain because he knows he cannot use force against this regime if he has not shown the American public that he did everything he could to change Iranian behavior short of military action; and Sens. Obama or Clinton because they believe that greater leverage can be exerted on Iran by direct negotiations.

Just because I favor negotiations with states like Iran, however, does not mean that I have illusions about such talks. Agreement may be impossible. We should enter these talks to see if we can change Iran's behavior, and to make clear we are not the problem. Their pursuit of nuclear weapons is.

True, for negotiations to succeed both sides have to adjust. We would have to put something on the table other than only demands. For the Iranians to get what they seek from us -- regime acceptance, civil nuclear power, an end to sanctions -- they will have to give up their pursuit of nuclear weapons, their support of terror and terror groups, their opposition to Arab-Israeli peace, and their continuing abuse of human rights.

But knowing what you seek is not enough. We must also prepare for negotiations to give them their best chance of success, and to be sure that we are not sending signals that we need the talks more than the other side. So using back-channels or third parties to set an agenda should be part of how we use negotiations as a tool of our statecraft. Should we enter into talks with a state like Iran when its leaders perceive us as weak, they will believe the talks are only about our acquiescing to what they want.

Ultimately, we have to ask ourselves the following question. Why, in a world in which our power is not unlimited and in which our standing and credibility have declined, would we want to deny ourselves one of the tools available for promoting and protecting our interests around the globe?

If there is a difference between the presidential candidates on who we should be negotiating with and how we should approach those negotiations, let them explain those differences. Their explanations will reveal much about their

approach to foreign policy.

Mr. Ross, now at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, was special Middle East coordinator in the Clinton administration. He is the author of [Statecraft and How to Restore America's Standing in the World](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270>) (Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2007). ❖

Wall Street 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

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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