

A Diplomat's Assessment

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

Feb 17, 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.

Yale University's journal of politics, *The Politic*, interviewed Institute counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow Dennis Ross for its February 17 issue. Avi Kupfer conducted the interview.

From your experience of over twenty years as a diplomat, how would you characterize the approach each administration took regarding the threat of terrorism? Did you find any significant differences in policy formulation towards Islamic extremism?

The same basic approach was probably adopted by all of them in the sense that terror was seen as a security problem and an intelligence problem. The focus was very much on working with others in the international community intelligence establishment to maximize what we knew about threatening groups, to try to limiting their movements, and to provide counters to them. We tried to make it difficult for them to have mobility; we tried to identify who the main operatives were and then act accordingly. I think there was probably a lot more continuity there than change from administration to administration. Terrorism was seen as a threat, but, obviously, it was not seen in quite the same way as it came to be seen after 9/11.

You wrote in a 2005 *Foreign Affairs* article, "The war on terrorism may be global, but its roots are [in the Middle East]." After your extensive career as an expert diplomat in the region, what do you see as the roots of terrorism?

Terrorism's roots seem to be concentrated in the Middle East, most dramatically among different kinds of what may be described as "radical Islamists" now. Why does it have its roots there? It is partly out of a sense of grievance, partly out of a sense of ideology rooted in the extortion of faith in Islam where you have those who have found a way to distort it for their own purposes. You have conflicts in the Middle East that have created a certain context, but historically you have states that have supported it, not only against Israel but against each other. It was not unusual at all in the past for different Arab regimes to use different terror groups as threats against their neighbor, as ways to subvert their neighbors, as ways to persevere their own strength, and as ways to coerce their neighbors. There really is a legacy here, but it has taken on a new path with radical Islamists who are a threat to the existing state structure.

Syria is perhaps the most prolific state sponsor of terrorism. The country gives Hezbollah a substantial amount of financial, weapons, political, and organizational aid and provides material support and a safe haven to several Palestinian rejectionist groups. In 2005 you wrote that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad "must carry out a strategic shift to survive." Do you see such a shift as a real possibility under the Baath Party's regime? Can the United States play any significant role in persuading Syria to abandon the terrorist groups that it has supported to this point?

The Syrians would have to make a strategic transformation -- basically make a strategic U-turn. They have to change their orientation away from Iran and stop using Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad as tools. I would say that there is some potential because they don't necessarily have an ideology that creates a marriage with Iran, but they see a certain benefit by having an association. The question is if it is possible to wean them away. That would partly be a function of approaching the Syrians with what I would describe as a 'stick-and-carrot approach.' They have to see that their current posture endorses a cost that they measure as a cost and a price that they measure as a price. Today they don't really see the cost. They see political threats from the U.S., but they don't see much consequence. If the U.S. could more clearly concentrate the Syrian mind on what it is they stand to lose and then ensure them what they have to gain, then you might have a chance to get the Syrians to change their behavior. However, at this juncture, it doesn't look like there is any current prospect of chance. But I wouldn't rule out the possibility that if you constructed an approach in which there was a combination of serious penalties and some inducements that might you might have that chance.

Many militant Islamic organizations support terrorism while maintaining political-humanitarian wings. As the United States openly asserts that it will not negotiate with terrorists, how must it, or any government for that matter, confront the military wings of Hamas, Hezbollah, or Fatah? Do you think a viable political relationship exists between the U.S. and political organizations with ties to terrorism?

No I don't -- if these are the groups you're talking about. They're all political movements with militias. They use terror as a fundamental part of the way that they operate. They need to understand that the world doesn't adjust to them; they have to adjust to the world. If they think that they don't have to change who they are, then they won't change. The key is to understand that many of these groups have real credos, have real belief systems. It is not just an instrumental posture that they have. If you're going to try to affect the behavior of Hamas, Hamas has to understand that they have to make some choices. One of the problems with those who say we should deal with Hamas is that if you deal with Hamas, you undercut the non-Hamas Palestinians who might believe in coexistence. One of the challenges is to recognize that for groups like Hamas, recognition is a huge payoff. To give them a huge payoff without doing anything to change behavior will only cement the way that they operate now. It will convince them that they are right to behave the way they do. They want to create a sense of inevitability about their agenda, and what you want to show is that there is no inevitability in their agenda. The only inevitability is that they won't succeed -- especially for a group like Hamas that has presumption and a self-perception that it has as connection to the society as a whole. If they were to lose the prospect of those connections, then you would likely see a potential for some adjustment in their behavior or at least the likelihood of some splitting in Hamas.

Hezbollah holds more than 10 percent of the seats in Lebanon's Parliament and is seen by many of the world's governments as an integral part of the country's social and political structure. Since the U.S. holds a markedly different view regarding the Hezbollah's role in Lebanon, to what extent should it take into account the opinions of the rest of the world when making policy towards the organization?

I think that even with Hezbollah, which does have a base in the political system because they use elections, we're dealing with radical Islamists who are not all the same. Hezbollah and Hamas, even though they are Shiite and Sunni, have similar strategies in terms of pursuing a political strategy while never giving up their militias. They use their militias as a lever against the existing government. This is especially true of what Hezbollah now does with the Lebanese government. Our approach has to be one in which we don't make adjustments to them as long as they are such strong believers in the use of terror. There are a lot of people who like to say that we should approach Hezbollah and Hamas the way that the British approached Sinn Fein and the IRA in the end. What's interesting is that in the case of Sinn Fein, they committed to outright political process in the image of the principle of decommissioning their weapons. I would say to those who believe we should deal similarly with Hamas and Hezbollah -- let them adopt the

same posture that Sinn Fein was prepared to adopt, and then you can respond to them the same way.

The European Union continues to resist calls from the U.S. and Israel to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Do you see the potential for a change in Europe's policy in the near future?

I do not think that they're going to change their posture, but just because they have a particular posture does not mean we have to accept it. The fact of the matter is that you work with them any way that you can. They don't treat Hezbollah as a normal political actor either; it's not as if they treat them the same as they do all other Lebanese political actors. Even if they don't have the exact same posture we have, at least they have a posture that is not one that treats Hezbollah like normal political actors, which they are not. I would add that if we began to accommodate Hezbollah, then you would see even greater accommodation on the part of the European Union rather than less.

Fatah is increasingly regarded as the most moderate and diplomatically accessible Palestinian authority. Many experts are optimistic about the prospects for crafting a peace agreement between Fatah and Israel. Can Mahmoud Abbas negotiate a lasting peace with Israel without first severing Fatah's financial and organizational ties to Tanzim and Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, its right-wing, militant factions?

I think that Abbas can negotiate such an agreement, but he won't be able to implement one. There comes a point where even Fatah itself will have to make a distinctive choice about who are its people and what is their purpose. The leadership of Fatah, in this case Abu Mazen, has made a commitment to coexist that they genuinely believe. Abu Mazen has to be able to deliver on that, and he will argue that he has a pathway for resolving Palestinian national aspirations. The burden will continue to be on the Fatah leadership to act upon whatever has been negotiated and whatever agreements have been made.

In a June 2007 article you wrote that "Israel needs to coordinate with [those in Fatah] who are committed to coexistence and who seek to improve the day-to-day realities for Palestinians." However, recent studies by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research have found that support for violent attacks against Israeli targets does not decrease among individuals with higher education and living standards within the West Bank and Gaza; in fact, support for such attacks often increases with these variables. In light of this, what effect do you think that social and economic improvements in the West Bank can have on political change?

I think the way to look at this is that there is no guarantee that social and economic changes will produce the outcomes that you want but there is almost a guarantee that if you don't change it for the better, then there's no prospect of change. It's not a case that the socioeconomic realities determine whether you can end terror, but one thing's for sure: there's no possibility of changing things if you can't improve the Palestinian stake in what is a prospect. The key point to recognize here is that no political process will be credible if you don't produce at the same time some changes in the day-to-day realities. If there are no changes in the day-to-day realities, no one is going to particularly believe what you accomplish on the political front.

After the recent collapse of a sewage reservoir in the Gaza Strip, the Israeli government denied official requests to bring certain reconstruction materials into Gaza, as the materials could be used to launch rockets into Israel. In dealing with this hostile, yet extremely dependent territory, how should Israel balance its commitments to humanitarian support for Gaza's citizens with the protection of its own people?

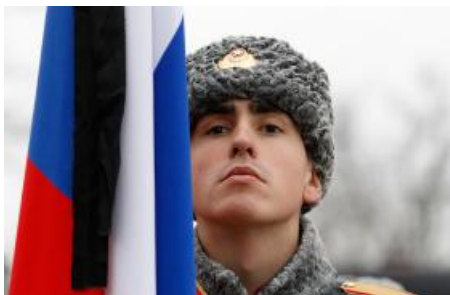
It must strike a balance for its own reason and also to demonstrate to the world that it will not contribute to humanitarian disaster even while it must protect its own people. There must be ways to contend with an issue like sewage. If you create a health hazard, that's not something so easy for Israel to recover from. I would say that they must find a way to strike a balance. One way, of course, is to use plastic piping, which could not be used as a source as a Qassam rocket launcher. There are times when you must be creative, but for Israel's own sake, it must find a way to strike that balance.

Can such a policy of balancing be effective in the long term, and if not, how should Israel proceed in its relationship with the Gaza Strip?

The key is going to be whether you are able to work out arrangements with Abu Mazen and the Palestinian Authority or not. They cannot affect Gaza today. If an agreement were possible in the near future, they would have no way of implementing it within Gaza. What they want to do is to create legitimacy for their position and show that Hamas offers nothing for the future of the Palestinians. You're trying to construct that kind of an approach without creating such a disaster in Gaza that you lose any base to make changes. It's not in Israel's interests or the American interest to see a total collapse of the private sector within Gaza. On the other hand, you cannot let Hamas off the hook. So here again, you're trying to strike a balance not only in the near term but also with an eye towards the strategic interests of the time. Ultimately it's in Israel's interest for the Palestinians who coexist not to be the ones who reject their existence and who are interested in turning Gaza into a platform for attacks against Israel. There's no simple answer here, but the balancing must not only be in terms of the humanitarian issues that have to be addressed, but the balancing must also look towards the longer term.

Ambassador Dennis Ross is a diplomat and scholar who has been at the forefront of the United States's efforts in the Middle East Peace Process for over twelve years. Throughout the more than 20 years he spent in government, Ross served as the Special Middle East coordinator under President Bill Clinton, Director of Policy Planning under President George H.W. Bush, and Director of Near East and South Asian Affairs on the National Security Council staff, as well as Deputy Director of the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment under President Ronald Reagan. Currently, Ross is The Washington Institute's Counselor and Ziegler Distinguished Fellow. ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter

Feb 16, 2022



Jay Solomon

(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

TOPICS

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](/policy-analysis/peace-process)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](/policy-analysis/terrorism)

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