

United States Must Focus on Getting Hamas to 'Transform Itself' and Accept Israel's Right to Exist

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

Feb 15, 2006

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Dennis B. Ross, who was the chief U.S. Middle East peace negotiator in the administrations of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, says that in the aftermath of the Palestinian electoral victory by Hamas and with elections pending in Israel, there are "two different dynamics" at play in the region.

From the Israeli side, there is a widespread desire to separate themselves from the Palestinians by additional unilateral withdrawals from occupied territory. But separation is not enough for Hamas, whose agenda is "in fact seeing Israel disappear."

Ross says that position makes it crucial for the United States "to maintain a strong consensus internationally that there will not be relations with a Hamas-led government; there will not be assistance for a Hamas-led government, unless Hamas is prepared, in fact, to change itself -- unless it's prepared to recognize Israel's right to exist [and] to renounce violence as an instrument of policy and accept that the way to deal with Israel is by resolving all differences through peaceful means."

Ross, the Counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, says "my whole approach is governed by the premise that Hamas gets nothing for free. If it wants to operate in a fashion that benefits Palestinians, then it has to adjust its behavior, and if it doesn't, there's a consequence for that."

Bernard Gwertzman, Council on Foreign Relations: It's been a few weeks since the Palestinian legislative elections that produced a surprising victory for Hamas. What's your overall impression of the situation now?

Dennis Ross, The Washington Institute: My overall impression is that we continue to have two different dynamics at play in Israel and among the Palestinians. In Israel, we have a new reality of a very strong centrist coalition reflecting a consensus that is really quite remarkable in Israel [a consensus] about what the future of Israel ought to be, at least as it relates to the Palestinians. It leads Israelis increasingly in the direction of wanting to separate from the Palestinians, wanting to be out of Palestinian lives, wanting not only not to have a relationship with the Palestinians, but also not controlling what Palestinians do. It leads to an impulse on the Israeli side of anticipating a withdrawal from most of the West Bank, being done under circumstances where the Israelis don't really negotiate with the

Palestinians, but with the United States, about certain understandings of where things will be in the aftermath.

On the Palestinian side, there was an election that was a transforming election. The problem is that those who won, Hamas, have a very clear agenda that is not related to getting out of Israeli life, but in fact seeing Israel disappear. But Hamas has no practical way to act on that agenda in the near term, and will have to contend with the reality of having to govern. So there's a clear dynamic on the Israeli side, there's a less clear dynamic on the Palestinian side.

Gwertzman: Let me jump ahead to the U.S. position. The United States has always been the de facto mediator throughout between Israel and Palestinians, although the Bush administration, I guess, had done as little as possible to mediate. Do you have some thoughts, as a former negotiator, on what the U.S. position should be now?

Ross: I do. I think we're in a totally different situation from what we were in the past. You have to realize that, in effect, the clock has been turned back. On the one side, it's been turned back because we're no longer likely to have a Palestinian government that at least is rhetorically committed to a peaceful solution with Israel, or rhetorically committed to a two-state solution, or committed to negotiating such an outcome. We are now, in all likelihood, going to have a strong force controlling the Palestinian legislative council -- Hamas -- that rejects the very idea of peace, rejects the very idea of a two-state solution, and whose avowed purpose is an Islamic state and the eradication of Israel.

One thing we hear very clearly from the Hamas leaders -- even when they say they might be prepared to accept a long-term truce -- [is that] they will not accept Israel's right to exist. Given that, it's pretty clear we're out of the peacemaking business. But I think we have to look at what it is we want for the longer term. We may not be able to be in the peacemaking business right now, but we don't want to give up the possibility that a two-state solution could still be achieved over time. And if that's the objective, then I think in the near term what we have to think about is, how do you ensure that the Palestinians move back in that direction? And how do you work with the Israelis in a way that still makes such an outcome eventually possible?

Gwertzman: How do you do that?

Ross: Well, in the near term, you have to do several things. First and foremost, you have to focus on having Hamas transform itself. If it isn't prepared to transform itself, then you look for a change from within the Palestinian society to get back to leadership that would be committed to a two-state solution.

Now if that's your starting point, I think it has the following implications for what the United States needs to do. First, I think, the United States has to maintain a strong consensus internationally that there will not be relations with a Hamas-led government; there will not be assistance for a Hamas-led government, unless Hamas is prepared, in fact, to change itself -- unless it's prepared to recognize Israel's right to exist [and] to renounce violence as an instrument of policy and accept that the way to deal with Israel is by resolving all differences through peaceful means.

That has to be the essential standard. Now, the United States did work with the members of the "road map" quartet [representatives of the European Union, Russia, the United Nations, and the United States] to issue a statement that's pretty close to those kinds of conditions, but we've already seen a defection in terms of Russia announcing that it's going to meet with Hamas. Whatever is being said right now about what they're going to say to Hamas, the Russian meeting is itself a message. I can assure you that the way Hamas reads it is that this is proof that the world will adjust to Hamas, and that Hamas does not need to adjust to the world. Our premise has to be that Hamas has to be the one to do the adjusting.

So the first thing is, not only does the United States have to work to maintain this consensus, but it has to work very hard to ensure that it doesn't erode. I think the Russians need to understand that if they're not prepared -- as a message of this meeting -- to say that there will be no further meetings unless Hamas changes, then it's pretty hard to see how the Russians should be permitted to remain as a member of the quartet. There's no particular logic of

having a quartet if one of its members is free to do whatever it wants quite irrespective of what is agreed by the other members. So first things first: Focus on how you can work very actively, not just to identify the elements of a consensus, but to maintain it. That's No. 1.

No. 2, I think it's important for us to work very assiduously, very persistently and intensively, with the Egyptians and the Jordanians, to get them to reinforce the fact of this consensus, not just internationally outside the region, but within the region -- that, in effect, they're going to retain the posture that these are the conditions for any leadership of the Palestinian Authority [PA]. In terms of what they themselves will do with any leadership of the Palestinian Authority, that depends upon their readiness to adopt these kinds of positions.

No. 3, I think we have to work, also, almost the way we have done with the Saudis on the financial issues as they relate to al-Qaeda; we have to work the same way as it would relate to Hamas. By that I mean, in the past -- certainly until 2003 when the Saudis had what they considered to be their own 9/11 [when three bomb attacks allegedly carried out by al-Qaeda operatives killed at least thirty-four people in Riyadh] -- the Islamic charities provided most of the money. [This is] true for Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states. I think it's critical that we now work with the Saudis and the others in the Gulf to make sure that Hamas is not going to be funded that way.

Again, unless Hamas is prepared to change its position and adopt the terms that make peacemaking possible, that make the idea of peaceful resolution possible, they have to be prepared to accept the resolutions of the international consensus. And by the way, that's even what the resolution of the Arab League adopted. The Saudis are the ones that led the Arab League in adopting a resolution that made it clear that there would be peace with Israel, and that there would be diplomatic relations with Israel, if Israel was prepared to withdraw to the 1967 lines.

Gwertzman: Now, I have to point out that in recent days there's been an effort on the part of Hamas to get Arab support. Today, the king of Jordan called on the European Union in a meeting he had with the foreign minister of Germany to continue aid to the Palestinians. President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt also said the Western powers should open ties to Hamas; he doesn't expect Hamas to just say it will recognize Israel. So do we run the risk of being seen in the broader Mideast as trying to starve the Palestinian children?

Ross: Well, I think you have to draw a distinction here. Developmental assistance is one thing; humanitarian assistance is another. I think it should be very clear that there is not going to be an effort to punish the Palestinian people and have the Palestinian people pay a terrible price. On the other hand, I think there should be an understanding that there are consequences. Hamas doesn't get to have it both ways. Hamas doesn't get to receive all the benefits of outside support and recognition if it's going to maintain its posture of rejecting Israel and its right to exist, and its promotion and support for violence.

In a sense, the balance that has to be struck is to avoid any humanitarian disaster for Palestinians. But on the other hand, Hamas can't be allowed to get what it wants and not make any changes. My whole approach is governed by the premise that Hamas gets nothing for free. If it wants to operate in a fashion that benefits Palestinians, then it has to adjust its behavior, and if it doesn't, there's a consequence for that.

Gwertzman: Now the Israeli election, of course, is still more than a month off. Right now the polls show the [newly founded centrist] Kadima Party ahead and the likelihood of [interim Prime Minister] Ehud Olmert becoming the new prime minister. What kind of guy is he?

Ross: Well, I think Olmert is someone who's been around the Israeli political scene for quite a long time. He was one of the princes of Likud. He has a longstanding involvement in Israeli politics. He was the former mayor of Jerusalem and a member of multiple Israeli cabinets. And he is very much a disciple of the Sharon approach to disengagement. In fact, I think it's fair to say, he was probably one of the intellectual godfathers to the approach. He was ahead of Prime Minister Sharon on this. He was the one who gave speeches on disengagement before Sharon did.

I think he is very much a reflection of what is the fundamental instinct among the broad Israeli center today. What's new in Israel is that we have a center that has basically forged a strong consensus. And part of that consensus is based on a premise that there are very few choices available for any Israeli prime minister when it comes to dealing with the Palestinians. The irony is, I think, that there's a willingness on the part of the Israeli public to go very far if there were a perceived Palestinian partner to negotiate an agreement with. I think [PA] President Abu Mazen [also known as Mahmoud Abbas] is seen [by Israel] as someone who is decent, but not someone who can deliver. Hamas is seen as a group that rejects Israel's very right to exist, and so by definition can't be a partner.

The absence of a partner doesn't mean that Israelis are prepared to stand pat and do nothing, because they still see demographic realities requiring Israel to take in its own hands a determination of its own future and not to hold that future hostage, either to Palestinian dysfunction or to outright opposition and rejection.

Olmert is a very good reflection of that. In many ways, you can say he was one of the intellectual leaders in terms of helping to shape that point of view. In any case, Kadima has held very firm in the polls from the time of its creation, when it was seen as simply an extension of Ariel Sharon, to now, in the aftermath of his incapacitation. It has remained very firm and steady in the polls. Now, the polls aren't always right, but the one thing you can take from polls, as being an indicator, is that when they hold very firm and very steady they reflect something that is going on. And I think right now they reflect a very firm position within the Israeli body politic a position that is unlikely to be changed unless we were to see a dramatic change on the ground in terms of the resumption of full-scale war between Israelis and Palestinians.

Gwertzman: Doesn't Abu Mazen, as president and head of the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization], have authority to negotiate on his own?

Ross: Well, he might have the authority to negotiate on his own, but what is it that he will have the power to deliver? We were talking before about what the United States ought to be doing. I think it's very important for the United States to demonstrate to the Palestinian people that it wants to retain a connection to them. It will not have a connection with Hamas or a Hamas-led government, but it will retain a connection to the people, to civil-society groups, and I would say to Abu Mazen as well.

The key is not just dealing with Abu Mazen. It is whether or not you provide material assistance to him. And here I think it would be dependent upon certain conditions. One would be: Is he in fact going to stick to conditions that he himself has made? He has said he will not ask anyone to form a government that doesn't accept his premises of recognition of Israel, commitment to a two-state solution, commitment to negotiations with the Israelis, and commitment to nonviolence. So No. 1, is he sticking to that.

No. 2, he's said he's the commander and chief of the security forces. He's since backed off that a little bit, in terms of acknowledging that he might not control all the security forces, because according to the basic law, the prime minister and the interior minister, as well as the president of the Palestinian Authority, have control of the security forces. But is he exercising the control that he has, and is he getting them to act accordingly? If he's doing that, then that would be a second reason to ensure that you maintain material assistance to him.

Is he acting on the decisions that he makes? Does he create a decision-making structure within the office of the presidency, something that he has not done until now, to ensure that what he decides is implemented? All these could be elements of ensuring not just ties but that you maintain material assistance for him.

The only area where I would have concern would be, if he doesn't follow through, if he doesn't fulfill those kinds of conditions, he could become a front for a Hamas-led government. Then he creates a kind of legitimacy for them with their calling all the shots and his doing very little. That would not be an acceptable outcome. So I want to see the United States maintain ties to the Palestinian people to make clear that we are committed to working with

Palestinians, but we are not going to work with Palestinians that promote violence and reject Israel. ❖

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