

Interview With Ambassador Dennis Ross  
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*For 12 tumultuous years, Ambassador Dennis Ross led America's efforts to broker peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors. He recounted that time in his seminal 2004 book, The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace, and is currently counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Ross spoke to AIPAC recently about Israel's quest for peace with the Arab world. Excerpts of the interview follow.*

**In your book *The Missing Peace*, you write: “My interest in Israel had been very much awakened by the Six-Day War in 1967.” Could you expound on that?**

I was a freshman in college, and I was riveted by the events leading up to the war. One heard harrowing cries from Arab leaders about how the war would avenge the loss of Palestine, and that this would be the end of the Jews and the end of the Zionist entity, and that the victorious Arab armies would meet to celebrate over the skulls of all those they had killed. If you look at not only what was being said but the cartoons that depicted all this in the Arab press, it demonstrated that this was a war that looked like it could be a war of survival or existence for Israel, and yet Israel had an astounding success militarily.

I thought what was going on in Vietnam at the time was something that was tying us down, and yet where U.S. interests were more profound was in the Middle East. So it was a combination of the run-up to that war, which seemed to raise basic questions about the survival of Israel, the inability of the United States to be doing very much because we were distracted in southeast Asia, the performance of the Israeli military, which seemed to capture the imagination of the world—they didn't provoke the conflict; Nasser provoked the conflict. I became not only acutely aware of the Middle East, but also more interested as a result.

**Describe how Israel initially tried to give back the territory it won in the Six-Day War.**

On June 19, the Cabinet of Israel's national unity government adopted a resolution offering to trade all the territory it won from Egypt and Syria in return for peace treaties with both nations. The decision of what to do with the territory won from Jordan—East Jerusalem and the West Bank—was put on hold. It wasn't precluded; it just was that the Israeli government chose to defer that as an issue.

So here we have something pretty profound—within one week of the end of the war, the Israeli government adopted a resolution stating that it was prepared to trade the territory that its army had captured on two of the three fronts that it had fought in return for peace treaties.

At the time, you have Moshe Dayan, Israel's defense minister, talking about how he was sitting by the phone waiting for it to ring, waiting for a call from any Arab leader willing to discuss peace. Israel was saying, look, we're not holding the territory because we want the territory, we're prepared to return the territory, but the price is peace.

### **How did the Arab states respond to the resolution?**

Well, the first response actually came at the Arab League's summit in Khartoum in late August and early September. They passed a resolution containing the "three nos"—no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel and no negotiations with Israel.

There was still too much of a shock among Arab leaders after the Six-Day War. When you look at what was being said throughout the Arab world before the conflict, there was an intoxication, there was this actual belief that, in fact, this was going to be the end of Israel, that the loss of Palestine from 1948—which was as much a function of all the competition between the Arab states, all of whom wanted to carve out a piece of it for themselves—was going to be settled once and for all. And the shock when it didn't happen was an overwhelming shock.

So I think, at least at this stage, that the Arab leaders were not able to make the leap from rejection of Israel to peace with Israel. The Israelis were ready to make a leap. Part of the reason they were ready to make the leap is because a major part of their thinking was that if we can demonstrate to the Arab world that we're a fact that they can do nothing about, then they'll understand and then they'll come to terms with us.

Now, you could not have had a more decisive victory than the Six-Day War. And so that's why Moshe Dayan is sitting by the phone waiting for it to ring. But, as I say in *The Missing Peace*, he's sitting too soon.

### **Forty years after the war, Egypt and Jordan are the only Arab states to recognize Israel's right to exist in peace as a Jewish state. Syria and the Palestinians have yet to do so. What are the differences between those actors that account for the difference?**

First, I think that we have to put the Syrians and the Palestinians in different categories.

In the case of Israel and its non-Palestinian neighbors such as Syria, these are state-to-state conflicts. The conflict today with Syria is a border conflict. Where should the border be? It's a state-to-state issue. It's not about existence—Israel isn't negotiating over the existence of Syria, and Syria would say they're not negotiating over the existence of Israel.

In the case of the Palestinians and the Israelis, two national movements are competing for the same space. It's an existential conflict that we thought in the 1990s had been transformed into a political conflict. Keeping it a political or national conflict is the only way you're going to settle it.

### **What have been the obstacles to a deal with Syria?**

The Syrians haven't had a leadership like the leadership that you had either in Egypt or in Jordan, which were prepared to make hard choices for peace. Now, there was an interesting period—the end of 1999 and the beginning of 2000—when Syria's then-President, Hafez al-Assad, looked like he was ready to do a deal. And we came very close—literally, the gap was measured in meters, not miles.

Assad's son and the current President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, said a couple of years ago that 80 percent of an agreement was reached. And I'd like to think it's true, although I would like to be able to compare notes to be sure that we have the same definition of 80 percent.

We haven't had a Syrian leader who was ready to conclude a deal that Israeli leaders were ready to conclude, even though I think we got to a point where the gaps were quite small. So it seems to me that that is a conflict that could be resolved if Bashar al-Assad is actually prepared to do more than say he wants to talk to the Israelis.

### **Is Bashar al-Assad powerful enough to make a deal with Israel today?**

Oh, I think he has the capability. Look, he's been in power now since the year 2000. We're coming up on the seventh anniversary of his being in power. Someone like that isn't in power for seven years unless in fact he controls the instrumentalities of the regime. So I think he has the power to do it; the question is, is he for real. He clearly has a fascination with Hassan Nasrallah [the leader of the terrorist army Hizballah] that his father never had. His father might have looked at Hizballah as an instrument to be used; Bashar seems to identify with Nasrallah.

That said, Bashar is also saying he's prepared to talk to Israel. Now that, at one level, is interesting, because Iran, Hamas and Hizballah are all saying at the same time that Israel's not going to exist anymore and that you don't have to talk to Israel. If nothing else, it sends a kind of interesting message that Iran, Hamas and Hizballah may not be the wave of the future, as they claim to be. Bashar's wanting to talk is at least something to think about.

### **Turning to the Palestinians, you were famously present in 2000 when the late Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat turned down what it remembered as the most far-reaching proposal for peace with Israel. Describe this plan.**

The most significant proposal put on the table was an American proposal in December of 2000, known today as the Clinton parameters. At Camp David in the summer of 2000, Ehud Barak, then Israel's Prime Minister, was clear with us on how far he could go. After additional discussion between then and when we finally put the Clinton parameters on the table, we made our best judgment of what it was that could bring the two sides together.

That's what the Clinton ideas were, a proposal made at the request of both sides to bridge their differences.

The Israeli government voted to accept it, meaning the Israeli Cabinet—it wasn't just Barak saying yes; it was the Israeli Cabinet that voted to accept it.

What was it? It was 100 percent of Gaza; it was 95-97 percent of the West Bank. The Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem would have become sovereign Palestinian territory and become the capital of the Palestinian state. There would have been security arrangements for the West Bank. The Palestinian state would have been non-militarized. Israel would have withdrawn over a six-year period from the West Bank. There would have been an international presence, and there would have been a right of return for Palestinian refugees to their state, but no right of return to Israel. There would have been a \$30 billion fund for resettling, rehabilitating, repatriating Palestinian refugees or compensating those who didn't choose to return.

Israel was going to be able to annex certain settlement blocs, probably in the neighborhood of five percent of the West Bank, and there were going to be territorial swaps between Israel and the new Palestinian state, and they were going to be probably in the neighborhood of about two percent. So it wasn't a one-for-one swap. There were going to be territorial and non-territorial forms of compensation for the annexation of the settlement blocs.

That was the essence of what the Clinton ideas were, and, as I said, the Israeli Cabinet voted to accept the Clinton parameters and Yasir Arafat said no to them.

### **Why do you think Arafat rejected it?**

Well, I think the Israelis were ready to make peace, and I think he was not. It isn't to say that all Palestinians around him were against it; I think most of them were for it. One of them famously told him, if you don't accept this, you'll create a *Nakba*, a catastrophe worse than the first. So many of the Palestinian negotiators wanted to accept it and understood the consequences of not accepting it. Prince Bandar of Saudi Arabia said that if Arafat didn't accept it, it wouldn't be a tragedy, it would be a crime.

### **How would you assess the Palestinians' willingness to come to terms with Israel today?**

I think the primary obstacle to peace today is that Hamas has significant weight in the Palestinian Authority and limits what it is that the Palestinian president, Abu Mazen, is likely to be able to do. If Abu Mazen was less constrained, I think that he would try to reach an agreement. Arafat had the capability but not the intention to make peace with Israel. Abu Mazen is just the opposite—he has the intention, I think, but not the capability.

The Palestinians essentially have a two-headed government, one head of which is prepared to co-exist with Israel, the other of which is not.

The emergence of Hamas as an important figure in the Palestinian political reality takes you back to the days before the Oslo peace process of the 1990s. Hamas doesn't recognize Israel and is committed to violence. In Hamas' eyes, the most that is possible in terms of Israeli-Palestinian agreements are cease-fire kinds of arrangements, not anything that is going to produce enduring co-existence.

In the case of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Abu Mazen's Fatah faction, their position is different. They still are committed to—at least they say they're still committed to—the principles of the Oslo peace process, as well as the two-state solution that is at least implicit in Oslo.

**If Dennis Ross were again appointed Middle East peace envoy, where would you start to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian situation today?**

I would work on three tracks. Track number one would be negotiations for a comprehensive cease-fire, because you have to produce calm that is going to be sustainable. This is the one area where I think there's a strong convergence between Israelis and Palestinians today.

The negotiation which we should help broker wouldn't be with Hamas; it would be between the Prime Minister's office in Israel and the President's office among the Palestinians. You would leave it to Abu Mazen to deal with Hamas. But Hamas would have to enforce—not simply observe—a cease-fire.

On the Palestinian side, they would have to stop all attacks against Israelis. They would have to stop the arms buildup in Gaza, which sooner or later is going to produce an Israeli intervention in Gaza, and if that's underway, any political process you have at the same time is going to disappear. So you would focus on Palestinian obligations, and there would be Israeli obligations of stopping incursions, stop making arrests, stop targeted killings. You would have to have mechanisms to deal with following through on the commitments, and you would have to have understandings on what is a violation and what happens when there is a violation, what's the consequence of it.

The second track is, have a political process. The political process can still deal with what can be possibilities over time. One thing is, have discussion between Israelis and Palestinians on what the day after peace looks like, so you know what the relationship between the two states will be.

The third track should be we should be working with all the international donors to see what can be done to affect an ongoing competition between Hamas and Fatah. There isn't a third force among the Palestinians. Fatah represents a national movement. Hamas represents a religious movement. If Hamas succeeds in winning that competition, we're

going to transform a national conflict which can be solved, at some point, into a religious conflict which cannot be.

It's very important for the donors—us and the donors working together—to work with those in Fatah who are prepared to remake Fatah. If they're not prepared to remake Fatah, they're not going to win the competition. No one is going to be able to remake Fatah for them. Those in Fatah right now are more aware of what's at stake, because they see Hamas growing even in the West Bank.

### **How can Fatah remake itself?**

They have to build what I call a culture of accountability.

That's fundamentally what's been missing on the part of the Palestinians, a culture of accountability. In the first instance, they have to be accountable to themselves, not even to the Israelis. If they're not accountable to themselves, they're certainly not going to be accountable to anybody else. One of the problems with Arafat's leadership was that he didn't want to build institutions, because that would have limited his power. He didn't want to build accountability, because that would have limited his power. He wanted factions, because that meant everybody would compete with each other, and that he would be above it. Well, the Palestinians are paying the price for that.

Now, they have to shape a new reality for themselves, and if they don't, you're going to see Hamas dominate. They want to take over the PLO, and they want to win the Palestinian presidency in the next election. If they extend their control over all the institutions, then in the end, as I said, this conflict will be transformed from a national one into a religious one, and you can't settle a religious one. If the Palestinians develop a culture of accountability, peace will become possible. If they don't, it's going to be a very long time before we see peace.