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Views on Middle East, Israel and Palestine

Dennis Ross tells 'Post' why Obama

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Dennis Ross, top Middle East adviser to two former US presidents, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, has shed his bipartisanship to campaign for Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama.

He now serves as Obama's senior adviser on Middle East issues and is visiting Jewish communities around the US to urge undecided voters to back his candidate. He is aware of the skepticism that many in this typically staunchly Democrat demographic have toward Obama's Israel credentials and his push for engagement with Iran.

Questions on these topics were just some of those that confronted him in a gathering of more than 200 Jewish voters in this crucial swing state this week. He spoke with The Jerusalem Post after fielding the crowd's queries, excepts of both of which are presented here.

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Hilary Leila Krieger, Jpost correspondent, THE JERUSALEM POST

You began your remarks by saying Iraq's the most positive story in the Middle East right now. Are you worried that an early withdrawal could affect the balance in the Middle East?

The fact is, whoever's president, you're going to have a withdrawal from Iraq, because we simply can't sustain the presence we have there. How you create a political and diplomatic surge, married to the withdrawal, is important. For a long time I was in favor of using withdrawal as a lever on the political side.

Obama favors engagement with Iran, but the time for negotiations is extremely short given the progress Iran is making enriching uranium. What are you able to do diplomatically in such a limited amount of time that hasn't been done before?

What we've done during the last couple of years is basically pursue a policy of weak sticks and weak carrots - what a surprise it's failed. We have focused on the [UN] Security Council, which operates at the lowest common denominator, and that's one of the reasons that none of the four Security Council resolutions demanding Iran stop [enriching uranium] hurts the economy. So you've got to be prepared to go outside that forum.

One of the things that he's going to do is focus on how do you generate a whole lot more pressure, how do you begin to use the kind of diplomacy that will be a whole lot more effective?

Let me give you an example of what you could do. Saudi Arabia has enormous financial clout. Saudi Arabia has an enormous stake in Iran not going nuclear. But the Saudis have not been enlisted in a strategy to use that financial clout. Could Saudi financial clout make the difference in terms of European behavior? Yes. Could Saudi financial clout make the difference in terms of Chinese behavior? The answer is absolutely. If China had to choose between Iran and Saudi Arabia, they'd choose Saudi Arabia.

But we haven't created a strategy where we do that. We go to the Saudis and we treat everything in a segmented fashion right now... So one of the things you have to do is recognize where we have leverage and where others have

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leverage and how do you mobilize that leverage on the Iranian vulnerabilities.

One of the reasons the Europeans hesitate to do more is because when we don't talk to the Iranians, they fear the increased economic pressure means a slippery slope to confrontation. Now when we're prepared to talk, without illusions, with preparation, that makes it easier for the Europeans to put more economic pressure on. We might not have a lot of time, but we actually have quite a few options - if we're prepared to behave differently than we have.

Given how Obama said at the AIPAC conference in June that Jerusalem shouldn't be divided and then said the next day that he wasn't ruling out shared sovereignty with the Palestinians, how can voters know that he'll really stand with Israel?

I am convinced that he will stand by Israel. I am. If I wasn't convinced of that, I wouldn't be standing here. Do I think that at the end of the day he will do whatever's necessary if Israel's threatened? I do.

You raised the issue of Jerusalem. That was at the AIPAC speech. And what he said, he said the following: "Jerusalem is Israel's capital." He said the city should never be divided again. And it's true that in that speech he didn't make the third point, which is, the final status of the city will be resolved by negotiations. Before the speech he said that, after the speech he said that. The American position has been those three points.

The fact of the matter is, Jerusalem is Israel's capital. That's a fact. It's also a fact that the city should not be divided again. That's also a fact. The position of the United States since Camp David, the position, by the way, adopted in the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, signed by [prime minister] Menachem Begin, was that the final status of Jerusalem would be resolved by negotiations. Those are the three points. That's what his position is.

What do you say about voters who will agree with you that he [Obama] supports Israel generally speaking, but that when it comes to a moment of truth - if Israel were attacked, for instance - that he wouldn't stand tough.

They don't understand his basic view of American interests, and also that he believes fundamentally in Israel's right of self-defense. One thing that's true about Israel, that's part of the Israeli ethos, is that Israel has always said we fight our own battles. They don't want Americans to come fight the battles for them. So I think it's important to understand who Israel is and what's important in their relationship with us. What's important in their relationship with us is to know they can count on us, but they don't want us to take their place in what they have to do for themselves. And I think it's important for any American administration to respect that.

You could argue that the Bush administration has tried the policy of engagement with the Palestinians that Obama advocates.

I don't think they know how to engage. They engage in a way that is completely ineffective. There's a kind of episodic approach to it. And the point of engagement is to engage in a way that's going to be effective.

The Bush administration disengaged for six years and missed certain moments when it could have made a big difference, for instance the withdrawal from Gaza [by Israel in 2005].

And then when the Secretary [of State Condoleezza Rice] engaged and Annapolis was adopted, look what was done. It wasn't prepared in advance and there was no day-after strategy.

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And even now, there was never a foundation there. The secretary of state focused on the negotiation. Where was the foundation built for it? If you have public disbelief, what was being done to deal with the public disbelief?

It's like she said, well, [Quartet envoy] Tony Blair will handle the economic stuff, I'll have three different generals handle the security stuff - nothing was integrated. There was a structure that was built up, but it lacked content.

So would you continue on that foundation, however shaky it might be, or scrap it altogether?

It kind of depends on what you're inheriting. You have to sit and talk to the parties and you have to see where they are, and you're going to have to make some judgments about, how can we build a more effective foundation? There's a psychological dimension here: How do you begin to reestablish a sense of possibility when both publics [Israeli and Palestinian] now disbelieve. That's what I mean by a foundation and a context. If you don't create a context for peace-making, the peace-making isn't going to be very successful.

And lastly, we have to be very careful about what we say we will be able to get done. It was a huge mistake to say we're confident we're going to reach this agreement. You built an expectation that you couldn't deliver on, and that's also got to be part of what shapes what we do.

So what would the goal be in terms of an Israeli-Palestinian peace process? What would be the Obama administration approach? An earlier effort, for starters?

There certainly would be a desire to demonstrate that this is an important issue. But again, look at all the issues he's going to be confronted with. First you have a financial meltdown, which effects everything.

Secondly, you have two wars that he inherited and it's pretty clear that in Afghanistan, what you do in Afghanistan is not only difficult in and of itself, but you also have to deal with Pakistan.

Thirdly there's the question of Iran, which is a very urgent threat and priority you have to deal with, and what you do on Iran will also affect how effective you can be on your strategy with the Arab-Israeli issue. Iran is building its leverage, which affects the kind of capabilities and readiness on the part of Arabs and Palestinians and what they can do in terms of compromise. So you have a lot to contend with, and it's a difficult legacy.

The Camp David negotiations which you helped Clinton lead at the end of Clinton's term didn't succeed either.

When I say engagement without illusion, it means negotiations are not a guarantee that you can achieve peace. But if you walk away and don't try, that's a guarantee that you can never make peace. What you don't want to do is create self-fulfilling prophecies.

If there's a Palestinian prime minister named Salaam Fayad, and he wants to see if peace with Israel is possible and he wants to build a Palestinian capability, and he wants to build from the ground up, that's probably in Israel's interest.

There are demographic realities, there are reasons that Israelis want to believe that peace is a possibility. Most Israelis don't want to live without hope. People can believe it's worth it to try and people can believe it's a waste of time to try.

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But the one thing I can tell you for sure, if Israel wants to face a future where everyone who surrounds it is like Hamas, not trying will guarantee that.

John McCain says the threat of Islamic extremism is the most important challenge the new president will face. What is your and Obama's perspective?

I view radical Islamism as a profound threat. I take it very seriously. The threat is not uniform.

Al-Qaida represents one part of the threat, Iran represents another part of the threat, Hizbullah represents another, Hamas - you have to develop a strategy that is a comprehensive strategy, that is not just a military strategy. If you're going to compete in the hearts and minds struggle, you're going to have to compete in a way that is not only military. Is there a military part of it? Yes, the military is part of it.

Are there other ways you have to compete? The answer is yes. And one of your objectives has to be, how do you help ensure that those in parts of the Arab world who basically see the radical Islamists are a threat to them, how do you team up with those who are your natural allies? I believe that Senator Obama gets that in a fundamental way, and obviously I have a greater comfort level with him on that than I do with his opponent.

Why do you think Senator Obama has a better approach to the Middle East than Republican candidate John McCain?

The policies that we've seen in the last eight years on these issues in my mind have not worked. If I was persuaded that Senator McCain would represent something different, then maybe I would have a different attitude. I personally am not persuaded that he will have a different approach.

Having an approach vis-à-vis Iran the way we've done it, I can tell you will not work. We will not bring others on board. We will not get them to put more pressure on them.

On Iran, I'm much more confident that Senator Obama will change the dynamic than Senator McCain will. On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I am much confident that we will [engage] without illusions.

Should we test the Syrians? The Israeli military thinks we ought to test the Syrians through a negotiating process. That's why the Israelis are using Turkey as a go-between.

Is it in Israel's interest to have Turkey as a go-between as opposed to us? Is Turkey going to watch out for Israel's interests the way we would? I don't think so. Do I think Senator Obama would do that in a way Senator McCain would not? I do. I can go issue by issue and I draw the conclusion that we need to change the dynamic. I don't believe the dynamic will be changed as effectively by Senator McCain as Senator Obama."

McCain has stressed his bipartisan credentials in this campaign, and some people think it's better to vote for him to avoid a situation where both Congress and the White House are controlled by the same party.

As someone who's worked with both sides, the only answer I have for you is, I look at where we are today and we have to change the direction. If you want to have what amounts to that balance, I think it makes it less likely we'll change the direction.

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