

Dennis Ross on why he's working for Obama and how he'd talk to Iran

By Natasha Mozgovaya

Tags: Israel News, Iran ††

WASHINGTON - Ahead of the American elections, Dennis Ross, the man who used to work as President Bill Clinton's envoy to the Middle East, has been busy "working" the shuls in Florida, a key battleground state in the presidential election. Aside from sitting on the boards of many different research institutes, Ross also acts as Democratic candidate Barack Obama's Middle East advisor. In addition, he is a leading contender - among some 300 candidates - for the post of secretary of state in an Obama government. This week he sat down and talked to Haaretz.

How was it in Florida? How did people react and what are the main concerns of the local Jewish community?

Ross: "When I was down there a few weeks ago, I think there were many more questions about Senator Obama than what I see among audiences today. The questions that are asked now show that people are beginning to decide that they want to go for him, and they want to be satisfied. I think there's a desire to understand the nature of his relationship to Israel, how he would approach Iran, and [what] he thinks about the peace process. I would say those are the three big questions I was asked in one form or another everywhere I went."

Assuming that the next president's capacity to deal with these issues will be limited because of national debt, two ongoing wars and the recent financial crisis, can he really promise anything - and keep his word? Advertisement

"In the first instance, [Obama] views the issue of Iran as an urgent priority, because the Bush administration's approach to Iran has failed. I talk about how Obama wants to use our willingness to talk as a means to get others to actually apply more pressure on the Iranians, as a way to ensure the talks' success, but also because the talks themselves send a signal [to] those who fear [that] applying more pressure means you're descending toward a slippery slope of confrontation. This is a way of saying, 'Look, we're trying to see if there's a way to avoid that.' Preventing Iran from going nuclear is a very high priority for him, not only because it's such a threat to Israel, but because it's such a threat to the United States.

"On the question of Israel, I talk about what I saw during his trip to Israel, how I saw his understanding of the relationship with Israel - he would describe it as a commitment of the head and heart. He looks at Israel and sees us as being two countries with common values. But he also looks at Israel and sees that whatever threatens Israel also happens to threaten the United States. So we have a [common] interest, because we end up facing the same threats.

"Regarding the peace process, I think this is an issue where engagement is also crucial, but, much like Iran, it is an engagement without illusions. When you engage, you do so without illusions. But when you don't engage, you leave the way open for your adversaries to actually gain more. The Bush administration wanted to disengage for its first six years in office. [By

doing so] they actually strengthened Hamas' hand, because Hamas' argument is [that] there is no possibility for peace. The least you want to do is show that there could be an alternative answer."

What kind of engagement might it be? The Israeli government isn't fond of being under pressure, and some people are very sensitive about the idea of talking to Iran, especially since the Iranian leadership is saying nasty things about Israel.

"Sure, that's why I started by saying that it's an engagement without illusions. With regard to the Iranians, we know that by not talking to Iran the U.S. did not improve the situation. Today Iran is a nuclear power - it doesn't have nuclear weapons yet, but in 2001 it was not yet able to convert uranium or uranium gas, it didn't have a single centrifuge. Now it's stockpiling low-enriched uranium. So the current approach of not talking hasn't worked. There's no guarantee that if you talk you'll succeed, but if you don't talk you will fail."

Does one talk to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?

"You don't talk to Ahmadinejad. First of all, he's not the decision maker. When Senator Obama suggests that he would be prepared to meet with him, he says such a meeting first has to be prepared. What he means is that you have to coordinate with your allies - all your allies. Secondly, it means you have to check whether you can put together an agenda for a lower-level meeting. If it becomes clear that you can't put together such an agenda, then you don't hold a meeting at a high level - the presidential level - because it's not going to lead anywhere. But if you can produce something that you know will lead somewhere, then it's silly not to do that.

"And in terms of the peace process, if you don't engage, then by definition, Hamas becomes stronger. We've seen that. Senator Obama won't deal with a non-state actor like Hamas unless Hamas changes its position, unless it's prepared to recognize Israel, unless it makes it clear [that] it gives up on terror, unless it's prepared to recognize previous agreements. So as for non-state actors, he's not willing to deal with them. Engagement without illusion in the peace process means that the U.S. should play a role, the U.S. should be involved, the U.S. should do what it can to promote the peace process and build bridges where it can.

"At the end of the day his position is [that] we cannot impose peace, because an imposed peace isn't peace at all. He's more than willing to invest in the process, but, then again, how he does it and in what ways will depend very much on the circumstances, and obviously there are many other issues out there."

Do you believe Israel and the Palestinians can reach an agreement in the near future? Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said she'll do her utmost to try and reach a framework agreement by the end of the Bush administration.

"I think that in the current circumstances, it's difficult to see that happening. It's important for the two sides to do what they can, but I think we need to be realistic as well."

Leaving the sidelines

Not everyone in Washington likes the Israeli talks with Syria. What do you think?

"The fact that Israel is negotiating indirectly with Syria through Turkey is a sign that Israel believes it's worth trying this approach, and I believe we should try it, too. I think it's a mistake not to. Too often when you don't talk - as I said before - you create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Just because you make the effort doesn't mean you'll succeed. But at least you ought to see if you can do it, you ought to do it with your eyes open, without illusions, without naivete, but it's worth probing and testing."

Why and when did you decide to take on an active role in this campaign?

"I decided to take an active part in the campaign because I feel the stakes are so high. I looked at us, especially in the Middle East, and I think we've been on the sidelines everywhere except [in] Iraq. And when the U.S. is on the sidelines, U.S. interests suffer and I think Israel's interests suffer, too. I felt that I just didn't have the luxury of remaining on the sidelines and sitting this one out."

Some of America's image problems didn't start with the Bush administration. Is it possible to repair the damage?

"One of the problems of the last eight years is that too often we've staked out objectives that we could not achieve. The rest of the world watches and looks for several things. The first is whether we are effective in terms of what we do. Secondly they have to see that we don't just lecture, we also listen."

Can you define what constitutes an American interest right now?

"I think our interest at this point around the world is [that] we do have to contend with the radicalists, they do constitute a serious threat to us. But I think we have to realize who our natural partners are and how we can work with both them and our allies so we, in a sense, build our collective leverage against those who constitute threats to us. It's very clear that we have to restore our economic well-being, because you can't be strong internationally if you're not strong at home, and if you're not strong financially."

Is it about the stakes, or Obama's personality and policies?

"It's a combination. First, the stakes were so high, and I think he's also a unique talent. I've sat in on probably 100 meetings with our presidents - those I've worked for and their counterparts. I know what it takes to be an effective, good leader. I saw Senator Obama at work in meetings with leaders. His manner of operation shows me unquestionably that he's someone who grasps issues in their detail, but also strategically, and he understands how to deal with leaders in an effective way, from the standpoint of promoting America's interests and needs. It's a combination of the stakes but also of seeing in Senator Obama a transformational figure at a time when I think the United States needs a transformational figure."

If Obama wins and you are offered the post of secretary of state, would you accept the offer?

"I'm not assuming that. The truth of the matter is that I'm concentrating on helping him through November 4. Whatever happens after that - we'll see."

What in his character impressed you the most, and what does he lack as a leader?

"I think that what impressed me the most is that he has perspective. He's very thoughtful, he knows how to ask the right questions, and he doesn't jump to conclusions. He's careful with his judgments and he's not afraid to ask questions, because he's not afraid to have people ask him questions. I think he has a kind of personal character and the kind of temperament presidents need.

"I've worked on the National Security Council staff of Ronald Reagan's administration, so I was in that White House. I served in a senior State Department position under George H. W. Bush and then I was President Clinton's negotiator on the Middle East - so I've been around a few American presidents. I've witnessed decision processes, I've been around American presidents at times of crisis, and I think I have a pretty good sense of what it takes for someone to be effective as president - in terms of judgment capability, perspective and even wisdom. And I think Senator Obama brings all those to bear. That's why I find him enormously impressive and believe he is just the person we need at this time."

Some progressive groups have expressed disappointment with him, saying that some of his positions are actually more hawkish than those of President Bush. Suddenly his positions regarding Al-Qaida terrorists, Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iran are becoming harsher.

"I think he is quite realistic. Contrary to what was commonplace practice in the Bush administration, he doesn't let ideology blind or color his thinking. His assessments are based on looking at the world as it is and understanding the kinds of things we'll need to do to change the world where it needs to be changed."

Taking into account the possible "Bradley effect" [referring to the discrepancies between voter opinion polls and the outcome of U.S. election campaigns], the traditional low voting rate and other "unknowns" - do you think Obama will win?

"I certainly hope he will, and I'm cautiously optimistic."