

Obama's Peace Offensive: The New President's Got Big Plans for the Mideast, starting with Dennis Ross.

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Barack Obama has put on a good show of focusing his pre-Inaugural attention on the economy while largely ignoring the rest of the world-especially the Middle East. On Wednesday the president-elect even trotted out some rather quaint logic as to why he was staying away from foreign policy, harking back to the old idea that politics should stop at the water's edge. "In domestic policy Democrats and Republicans-we can have our back and forth about tax policies," Obama said at a news conference, but "when it comes to international affairs, other countries are looking to see who speaks for America." On "foreign policy I think the need to adhere to one president at a time is particularly important." Challenged by a reporter over what he really thought about Israel's Gaza invasion, Obama said everyone would find out after Inauguration Day. "On January 20th you will be hearing directly from me and my opinions," he said. "Starting at the beginning of the administration we are going to engage effectively and consistently in trying to resolve the conflicts that exist in the Middle East ... Until then, my job is to monitor the situation and to put together the best possible national-security team to hit the ground running."

One man who will probably be running ahead of the pack is Dennis Ross, the longtime Mideast peace envoy who suffered through the rise and fall of the Oslo process in the '90s - working for both the first President Bush and Bill Clinton - before writing a thick, largely ignored book on the experience. He spent most of the past decade at the policy wonk's version of purgatory, a think tank. Now Ross is back in a new, more powerful role that offers substantial evidence that Obama intends to treat the problems of Mideast peace as all of a piece, from Gaza to Teheran to Syria. In an announcement prepared by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, his current employer, Ross is described as the new Obama administration's "ambassador at large" and Secretary of State-designate Hillary Clinton's top adviser on a wide range of Middle East issues, from the Arab-Israeli peace process to Iran."

The Obama transition team indicated the release of the announcement was premature. But until now Ross has been one of Obama's top transition advisers on the Middle East, along with Deputy Secretary of State-designate Jim Steinberg, former ambassador to Israel Dan Kurtzer and longtime aide Dan Shapiro. There's little doubt Ross will get the job. And this should tell us a great deal about what the new president intends to do "starting at the beginning" of his administration: Obama will seek to take a broad-based approach to the region, folding what have been separate tracks into a single conceptual framework. Until now the dickering between Israel and the Palestinians, between Israel and Syria, and above all between Israel and the Arab world and Iran have been treated as separate problems when in fact they are all but inseparable. Obama will seek to correct that, according to conversations I've had with his foreign-policy advisers, drawing on the obvious linkages: for example, that Iran's growing influence in the region rests on its support of Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza and its alliance with Syria, and that both Tehran and the Arab regimes

continue to use the unresolved Israel-Palestinian dispute as an excuse for confrontation and a lack of progress.

The change comes none too soon. Ross is no doubt advising Obama that, as the former Mideast negotiator has written, without active U.S. leadership in all these negotiations, the region is almost certainly doomed to everlasting conflict. In the absence of any meaningful U.S. negotiating role over the last eight years, Israel finds itself in the middle of a bloody invasion of Gaza that seemed to open up a new front on Thursday, with rockets being fired on the Jewish state from Lebanon and the Israelis retaliating. At the same time, all but ignored amid the global economic crisis and the war against Hamas, a recalcitrant Iran is close to becoming a nuclear power, setting off a catastrophic chain reaction that could lead to a fully nuclearized Middle East over the next decade or so if it isn't stopped. Even the most deftly handled negotiations or brilliantly conceived Cold War-style framework might not change matters much. But they must be tried. And Ross's previous experience as the indefatigable point man during the failed Oslo process, as well as the main negotiator with Syria, make him uniquely suited for a major renewal of U.S. diplomacy on nearly every front. That doesn't mean that some problems - like Gaza - won't take priority over others, but it does mean that there will be a brand-new U.S. approach.

Though he is often falsely portrayed by the left as relentlessly pro-Israeli, Ross's views are much more subtle and even-handed than that. In his 840-page memoir, "The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace," published in 2004, he harshly criticized both former Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu (who was "insufferable" because of his uncompromising views, Ross said) and then-Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat for failing to relinquish their mutual "myths." Both hoped unrealistically to hold onto lands and rights that neither could retain if there was to be a deal. And in his most recent book from 2007, "Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World," he rebukes the current Bush administration for turning traditional diplomacy into a "lost art" and concludes that it "has roiled, not regulated, international security." Indeed, the Bush administration argued that it too had an overall approach to the region: launch a war with Iraq, start up democracy there and everything would somehow come right in the peace process. "The road to Jerusalem goes through Baghdad" was the line we heard in Bush's first term. It was, of course, nonsense. The idea that Palestinians who wanted their land and homes back might be assuaged by democracy never added up. And war, by itself, only made things worse.

One reason a renewal of U.S. diplomacy across the region is so urgent today is a slew of upcoming elections, mainly in Israel, Lebanon and Iran. The absence of any U.S. effort at all in coming weeks might heighten Netanyahu's chances to win in February and reduce those of his main rivals, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Defense Minister Ehud Barak. And if Netanyahu gets in, all parties know that may well be the end of a negotiated peace and a two-state solution forever (the fact that most Israelis suspect this, despite Bibi's new prestige as Israel's economic maven, has helped make the election so close). Netanyahu's election in turn would likely remove what remaining legitimacy the moderate Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, has with his own people, giving Hamas the upper hand. The advent of a new

harder-line Israeli government, and the corresponding lack of a legitimate Palestinian interlocutor, could also harden the politics in Tehran as the Iranians head into their June presidential election. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose prospects have been clouded recently by the precipitous drop of oil prices (dispensing of oil revenues has been Ahmadinejad's main populist tool in the face of crippling sanctions), could get a big boost from this. So this is the moment the new Obama administration has got to demonstrate to the region and the world that some alternative to war and stalemate and extremism exists. Ross defines statecraft as the strategic use of "every asset or military, diplomatic, intelligence, public, economic or psychological tool we possess (or can manipulate) to meet our objectives." Now we'll need them all.

It is instructive that when Ross accompanied Obama to the Middle East last spring, he sat in on a meeting the future president had with the man he may well have to deal with as the next Israeli prime minister: the hard-line Netanyahu. According to an account given to me by Netanyahu's national-security adviser, Uzi Arad, the irrepressible Bibi lectured Obama on how the problem of Iran must be solved first. Then, and only then, could the Israeli-Palestinian issue be addressed. Obama did not agree with this "sequencing," but he knows that the best course is to try to grapple with all these interrelated issues at the same time, and with America front and center at the negotiating table. Ross is also aware that one of the flaws of the Clinton approach was not to have done a more thorough job in bringing the Arab leaders in the region into the process sooner, applying more pressure on Arafat in 2000 to accept what was clearly the best deal he was ever going to get from the Israelis for the creation of a Palestinian state.

No one knows the cost of failure in the region better than Dennis Ross. In "The Missing Peace," he recounts a private meeting on Dec. 29, 2000, shortly before George W. Bush took office, at which he presciently warned his longtime Palestinian counterpart, Abu Ala, that failure to accept the Clinton peace package would have terrible consequences: "Clinton is going to be gone ... replaced by a new President who lost the popular vote ... He has no interest in this issue. ... The people around him ... want nothing to do with Arafat. ... They will disengage from the issue and they will do so at a time when you will have [Ariel] Sharon as Prime Minister. He will be elected for sure if there is no deal, and your 97 percent [of the West Bank] will become 40 to 45 percent; your capital in East Jerusalem will be gone; the IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] out of the Jordan Valley will be gone; unlimited right of return for refugees to your state will be gone. Abu Ala, you know I am telling you the truth."

He was. It all came true. Dennis Ross is no panacea to the nearly intractable problems of the Mideast. The 50-year history of U.S. efforts in the Mideast is largely a history of failure, and Ross's thick memoir is laced with self-pitying laments over his inability to stop for a shower and his constant need for coffee. But it is reassuring to know that Ross will be back to deliver unpleasant but unavoidable truths both to President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton as well as to his future interlocutors in the Middle East.

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