

A strategic bond between US & Israel

On Oct. 9, our central Pennsylvania community had the pleasure of hosting Ambassador Dennis Ross, an American diplomat and Middle East scholar. Ross had served four presidential administrations as a foreign policy adviser in the State Department for over 30 years. This lecture was held at the York College of Pennsylvania as a pioneering educational collaborative between colleges in the region, and the Jewish Community Relations Councils of York and Harrisburg.

Ambassador Ross was greeted by an audience consisting of hundreds: students, faculty, college administrators and a public from all over the Central Pennsylvania region, including many of our state's legislators. He started off the evening with clever comments about the ironic timing of his visit (a date scheduled in April): "I realize you are here on a night when there is no level of political interest whatsoever." The audience responded with loud laughter. Two hours later the second presidential debate would broadcast live. Ross emphasized that his presentation would only reflect analytical (and not political) viewpoints of the Middle East and present how U.S. foreign policy has attempted to deal with the region's turnover in national identities and regimes since the end of World War II. His recently released award-winning book, "Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship From Truman to Obama," discusses the dynamics of the Middle East's national identities along with modern day Israel's creation and U.S. foreign policy in the region.



Ambassador Dennis Ross speaks at York College. (Photo: Submitted)

Ross unequivocally believes that the United States has gotten their MidEast policy strategies wrong for decades as it has vacillated between three flawed strategies:

1. If we distance ourselves from Israel we will gain with the Arabs. Ross pointed out that the Eisenhower, Nixon, Carter, Bush I, and Obama administrations did not achieve any gain with the Arabs employing this strategy and in turn made dangerous concessions to the Arab block to get nothing in return.
2. If we cooperate with Israel we will lose with the Arabs. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations were the first to embark on providing arms to Israel and take this new approach. It is important to note that not one Arab nation with whom the United States had relations and arms dealings with walked away from the U.S. during this time. In fact, Arab nations wanted to strengthen relations with the United States despite the new Israeli alliance since they have always depended on the U.S. for their own security.
3. We cannot transform our position in the region unless we resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Clinton administration orchestrated the Oslo Peace Accords between Israel and the Palestinians. However, as promising as it seemed at the time, it failed and a two state solution remains stagnant at this time. Ross said he personally has dedicated the last three years of his career to constructing a plan for a two-state solution since he feels it will ultimately be good for both the Israeli and the Palestinian peoples. He said the only prescription for peace between the two peoples is to have two states that legitimizes a national identity for each people.

He went on to clarify that the BDS movement (boycott, sanction and divestiture) of Israel does not embrace a two state solution, but to the contrary delegitimizes the right of Israel to exist in any form. On the other hand, the Netanyahu administration in Israel needs to adhere to a settlement policy that does not develop outside of the designated settlement blocks that would be used as “land swaps” in a two-state solution plan. The problem here is that neither side, Israeli or Palestinian, trusts the other to be committed to co-existing in peace. Ross hopes a new U.S. presidential administration can catalyze the resumption of peace talks on this issue, but he said it remains a lower priority of U.S. foreign policy with the rage of the Syrian war, ISIS strongholds in Iraq, and the escalation of Iranian domination of the region through funding and positioning of Shiite militias.

Ross emphasized that United States foreign policy will not be truly successful until it embraces a true understanding of the perspective of nation states that are threatened by Iranian aggression and its growing network of Shiite militias. Rather, the Obama administration agreed to an Iranian nuclear deal that strengthens an Iranian terror network on the borders of those threatened nation states. Furthermore, Ross has advised that the Obama and successive presidential administrations focus on developing contingency plans that can counter Iran’s use of Shiite militias. Iran’s militia recruitment reaches as far as Afghanistan where young men are promised Iranian citizenship if they join the Iranian backed militias. Additionally, there is the problem of ISIS recruitment. Ross stated that creation of “power vacuums” in the region have led to the terror militia proliferation we see today. Iraq and Libya are perfect examples where such vacuums were left by U.S. forces. The introduction of “western modernity” has also given rise to the struggle between the Islamic traditions and Islamic reformation.

On the political front, Iran is now flushed with over a billion dollars as a result of lifted sanctions from the nuclear deal and they are pumping these funds into arms for Assad's regime in Syria, the Houthi militias in Yemen who are on the border of Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah in Lebanon – their mainstay militia with over 200,000 rockets aimed at Israel from its border with Lebanon. Hamas also has missiles in Gaza that periodically get launched into the Negev region of Israel.

These realities present the next U.S. president with tremendous diplomatic and military decisions. The war in Syria has the most urgency as the massive humanitarian devastation there has impacted the entire world: 1 million are dead, 12 million are displaced (out of population of 23 million), and of the 12 million 5 million refugees have left Syria for other countries and the remaining 7 million are living in catastrophic conditions. He explained that Russia, who backs the Shiite Assad regime, does not prioritize targeting the Sunni based ISIS, but rather is focusing on defeating the non-ISIS Sunni militias. Russian tactical strategy is to use its power to destroy Sunni militias that are attempting to overthrow the Shiite Assad regime. The latest developments have trapped 250,000 people in the eastern part of Aleppo, which was once the second largest city in Syria. Russia has begun using bunker buster bombs to target underground shelters in the quest to depopulate this city. This will lead to creating another 200,000 refugees by the end of January.

The second issue the U.S. faces is ISIS having control of the Iraqi city of Mosul. The self-declared ISIS caliphate and its forces are preparing for another assault from U.S. forces any day. They set fire to oil wells as part of defensive strategy. Both the United States and Iran have converging interests in the liberation of Mosul from ISIS, but they have very different visions for what leadership should fill the vacuum.

Third is the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Yemen. The Saudis see Iran as an existential threat with its Houthi militia on its border. The United States military is assisting the Saudis prepare for an imminent air war on Yemen to defeat the Houthis.

The fourth issue is Egypt, with a population of 90 million people. They are still dealing with national unrest from the remnants of the Muslim Brotherhood taking on the country and a growing militia of ISIS sympathizers in the Sinai. Economically this country is in a dangerous position with low reserves in its Central bank and not enough money to buy food on the outside of its country to feed its population.

Undoubtedly these issues present a bleak assessment of the region. However, Ross was optimistic about two important developments underway that pose a brighter future for the region. First, there is a level of national security cooperation between Israelis and all the Sunni states: Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Arab states, Morocco and to some extent, Algeria. These states see Israel as a bulwark against Iran, ISIS and jihadi forces. The converging interests of Israel and these Arab states is not the first time. Ross pointed out that in 1981 Alexander Haig, the secretary of state under the Reagan administration, tried to get these Arab states and Israel to act upon their converging interests against Iran. It was unsuccessful then, however it is being acted upon now.

Ross feels the next presidential administration needs to have the inclination and diplomatic acumen to keep cooperation constructive among the Israelis and Sunni states to defeat ISIS, lessen the threat of Iranian imperialism and possibly channel the cooperation into a two state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Israel is the only nation in the Middle East that is a democracy (despite anti-Israel propaganda). It is a parliamentary government and currently there are 12 political parties serving as representatives of Israel's population, including Israeli Arabs. They have: general assembly, rule of law, separation of powers, freedom of speech, freedom of press, regularly scheduled elections (whereby the loser accepts the outcome), women's rights, gay rights (ironically Palestinian gays go to Tel Aviv for socialization), and government and nonprofit institutions to deal with sociological and economic issues. Nowhere else in the Middle East does a nation even come close to having a democratic infrastructure. Interestingly, in 1947 UNSCOP (The United Nations Special Committee on Palestine) proposed a Partition Plan to divide Palestine, upon British withdrawal, into two independent, democratic states – a Jewish one and an Arab one. The Palestinian people aligned themselves with the Arab block (then controlled by Egypt's Nasser) and rejected it and declared instant war on Israel and the Jewish settlers. The Jewish settlers, supported by the Zionist movement (largely based in the USA) embraced the proposal and declared a homeland in the name of the state of Israel – governed by a parliamentary democracy that allows for Arab Israeli to have equal representation (Arab Israelis are those who were residing in the territory that became Israel). Guess which Arabs are leading freer and more comfortable lives today, Israeli Arabs or Palestinian Arabs? The U.S. has a strategic partner in Israel as they share equal social values.

I highly recommend reading Dennis Ross' award-winning book for an in-depth discussion of the partnership between the two countries.

Allison Siegelman is a member of AIPAC York.