

FANTASIES OF A MIDDLE EAST ENVOY

Misunderstanding History and the Failures of American Diplomacy

By Ahmad Samih Khalidi

The story of the involvement of Dennis Ross in the Middle East is as long as it is remarkable. Analyst, diplomat, peace negotiator, special envoy, presidential counselor, author, and pundit, his career has spanned six U.S. presidents, eleven secretaries of state, fifteen National Security Council heads, and countless senior officials and Middle East hands, veteran and wet behind the ears. He has borne witness to almost every major Middle East event from one position of influence or another, from the Ronald Reagan era to the presidency of Barack Obama.

Though originally a specialist on the Soviet Union, Ross developed a notable focus on Israel and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Out of government, he has held privileged positions at the influential pro-Israel think tank he helped establish with Martin Indyk, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. A decade ago, he authored *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*, a thick volume that largely detailed his close involvement in Israel-Palestine negotiations after the Oslo Accords. A few years later, he wrote *Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World*, a plea—written during the George W. Bush administration—for the critical importance of diplomacy and wise American leadership in international affairs. In *Myths, Illusions, and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East*, written with Washington Institute colleague David Makovsky and published during Ross's tenure in the first Obama administration, the authors argue for a realpolitik approach to the Israel-Palestine and Iran issues.

▷ U.S. envoy Dennis Ross with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Jerusalem, Aug. 10, 1997. *Jacqueline Arzti/Associated Press*

Ross has returned head-on to the subject of Israel-Palestine in his latest work, *Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama*. It is an ambitious attempt to reinterpret the history of U.S.-Israel relations (and consequently U.S.-Arab relations)



over seven decades. His basic thesis is quite simple: under the misguided influence of the State Department Arabists and the U.S. foreign policy establishment, a concept took root under Harry S. Truman that U.S. alignment with Israel would cost it dearly with “the Arabs.” In light of the fact that the United States had (and still has) vast interests across the Arab World, not the least of which is oil, so this argument goes, these interests would thus best be served by maintaining some distance from Israel and occasionally pressuring it to accommodate Arab demands.

Over the course of 496 pages, Ross sets out to disprove what he believes has been this seriously misguided counsel. In practice, and despite their occasional vocal protestations, he argues “the Arabs” have repeatedly given precedence to their bilateral concerns and interests with the United States over their enmity towards Israel. Since inter-Arab rivalries rather than any real concern about Washington’s bias towards Israel have been the prime motivator of U.S.-Arab relations, it follows that the United States has rarely if ever paid a price for its alliance with Israel. It also follows that those who argue that maintaining some distance (or what has come to be known as “day-light”) between Israel and the United States are misguided if not downright wrong.¹ Indeed it is America’s proximity to Israel that attracts the Arabs to begin with.²

Ross’s thesis is reinforced with the supplementary claim that contrary to what many people believe, U.S. policy towards Israel is *not* significantly affected by domestic electoral pressures or concerns, that is to say from the “pro-Israel” (or Zionist) lobby. On a number of occasions, he says, different U.S. presidents have deployed various tools of pressure against Israel thus overriding the protests of the lobby, yet the end result has been little or no payback in terms of improved U.S.-Arab relations or America’s standing in the Arab (or Islamic) World.³ Conversely, American support for Israel has not led “the Arabs” to abandon relations with the United States because they have no realistic alternative anyway. And so, Ross concludes, since the substantive basis for American support for Israel is grounded in unchanging common values, mutual cultural empathy, historic sympathy for Jewish suffering, and a mutual commitment to democracy, this relationship is simply “doomed to succeed.”⁴

Ross’s reading of the history of U.S.-Israeli relations naturally reveals the strong imprint of the man’s basic political beliefs and guiding principles. In its determined pursuit of its central thesis, the result is more of a sustained argument in favor of a particular point of view than a comprehensive and truly balanced account of what may be the most extraordinary relationship in contemporary international politics. With his broad brush, Ross tends to downplay those elements that may shed an alternative light, and skirts around contrary views that may embarrass or conflict with his own. His belief that the U.S. is bonded to Israel come what may, and that this is essentially a cost-free enterprise (indeed, the real cost stems from adopting the contrary

view) is disputable at best and dangerously misguided at worst, and even appears to be increasingly out of tune with the emerging realities in U.S. politics and the general drift of developments in the region, including in Israel itself. Such misperceptions are no minor matter in light of Ross's past role and continuing influence, and one would have hoped that his accumulated experience would have produced a more nuanced and calibrated view. Ultimately, his reading of history tells us more about the man's own mindset than fully enlightening us as to the subject at hand, even if that itself may be a valuable contribution for those who seek to understand the kind of thinking that has shaped American policy towards Israel-Palestine over the past seventy-odd years.

Critical Decisions on Palestine

Ross claims that the rot set in under President Harry S. Truman, so it may be worth examining the Truman administration's experience in some detail.⁵ Truman was president at a crucial time just before and during Israel's establishment in 1945–48. U.S. policy at the time was not only critical in ensuring Israel's birth, but in according it international legitimacy. As the Zionist movement began to recognize that the global balance of power had begun to shift across the Atlantic from London to Washington, a series of major battles were waged with and within the U.S. administration to ensure that it would provide the necessary backing to support the Zionist project of statehood in Palestine.

Truman seems to have had sympathy for the Jewish cause when he took office in 1945 but no ironclad commitment to the Zionist project of creating a Jewish state in Palestine as such. His first clash with the Zionist lobby coincided with the July 1945 Potsdam Conference almost immediately after becoming president: fifty-four senators, two hundred fifty house members, and the legislatures of thirty-three states pressed him to call on the United Kingdom, then still the Mandatory power in Palestine, to "open Palestine to mass immigration" and "reconstitute Palestine as a Jewish commonwealth." When Truman hesitated due to British opposition, the Zionists organized a campaign of two hundred thousand telegrams in protest to the White House. Despite irritation with the lobby's pressure tactics, he adopted the Zionist demand for one hundred thousand immigrants to be granted immediate entry to Palestine.⁶ Shortly afterwards, and at a meeting with senior U.S. diplomats in November 1945 that was convened to explain his policy on Palestine, Truman was in a pessimistic mood. There would be no solution, he presciently suggested, but:

Palestine would probably be an issue during the [congressional and presidential] election campaign of 1946 and 1948 and in future campaigns. And he concluded by returning to the political pressure he faced: "I'm sorry,

gentlemen,” he said, “but I have to answer to hundreds of thousands who are anxious for the success of Zionism. I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents.”⁷

Truman’s struggle with the Palestine problem took him in different directions. While instinctively sensitive to the Zionist cause, he repeatedly chafed under Zionist pressure.⁸ Nonetheless, as he tried to reconcile between his own political instincts and the advice of the “establishment,” including Secretary of State George C. Marshall and Defense Secretary James Forrestal, both of whom cautioned against a pro-Zionist bias, as well as the pressure from London to maintain a balanced policy, Truman was effectively driven to adopt one Zionist demand after the other at least six times in a row; moving from support for mass immigration, to support for a Jewish “commonwealth,” to support for a Jewish state, to backing partition, to extending almost immediate *de facto* recognition of Israel in May 1948, to *de jure* recognition. In each case, any initial reluctance or hesitation was met with a torrent of protests, complaints, and private and public pressures, after which Truman complied.⁹

Yet in all this Ross constantly underplays the domestic element, avoiding any clear description of the tight concentric circles of domestic pressure that surrounded the Truman presidency. The fact that Truman’s 1948 presidential campaign advisors specifically warned against alienating the Jewish vote is ignored.¹⁰ The fact that David Niles, who (in Ross’s words) “served in a critical role,” and Clark Clifford, “who served as White House Counsel,” were ardent Zionist sympathizers is all but overlooked.¹¹ The fact that Niles was administrative assistant in charge of relations with labor and minority groups (e.g., the Zionist movement) is not mentioned. The fact that Truman’s inner circle of advisors included the staunchly Zionist Max Lowenthal escapes Ross’s notice.¹² The fact that some of Truman’s most important positions including that of recognizing Israel in May 1948 were actually drafted in collaboration with Jewish Agency second-in-command Eliahu Epstein is passed over completely.¹³ The fact that Zionist leaders made clear their readiness to deploy their electoral power is not highlighted.¹⁴ The fact that Truman at vital moments felt bound to respond to close personal friends who were lobbying him on behalf of the Zionist cause is ignored.¹⁵ The role played by the United States in unashamedly bullying other countries to vote in favor of partition in 1947 is nowhere to be seen.¹⁶

Even after Truman voted in favor of partition, the pressures did not let up. The Zionist movement was bent on securing formal U.S. recognition of the Jewish state declared by the United Nations, regardless of if and how the UN Partition Plan was to be implemented. One authoritative account, by historian David McCullough, puts it thus:

Hundreds of thousands of postcards flooded the White House mail, nearly all from Jewish interest groups. Largely as a result of the efforts of the American Zionist Emergency Council [the leading U.S. Zionist organization at the time], thirty-three state legislatures passed resolutions favoring a Jewish state in Palestine. Forty governors and more than half the Congress signed petitions to the president. David Niles grew so emotional in one meeting in Truman's office that he threatened to quit unless Truman moved more emphatically in support of the Jewish cause. [New York Democrat Party boss] Ed Flynn came down from New York to tell the President that he must either "give in" on Palestine or expect New York opposition to his re-nomination in July.¹⁷

Despite such accounts, all that we get from Ross is that Clifford subsequently "took great umbrage at the charge that domestic political pressures caused Truman to support partition and recognize Israel. He decried revisionist historiography and asserted that 'the facts totally refute the assumptions of the revisionists.'" Ross asks rhetorically, as if to throw up his hands in exasperation, "Why did their argument take hold?" Later, he offers a brief concession that "the pressures were real" but goes on to insist that, what really drove Truman was "deep conviction."¹⁸

The above summary does not do full justice to the extent of hesitation, backtracking, and confusion that marked some of Truman's critical decisions on Palestine. Yet Ross sees this as the moment when a certain "Arabist" template emerged that Truman was right to ignore. There is no doubt that the Zionist lobby was confronted by significant forces within the administration that did predict dire consequences for the United States should it align with Israel. Ross makes much of the fact that these never materialized.

But the truth is that the United States did pay a price. It did not necessarily take the form of an all-out assault on American vital interests, as the establishment pessimists had warned. But there was the emergence of a widespread culture of hostility and anger toward the West in general and America in particular; one that facilitated the spread of Soviet influence throughout the post-World War II years and that created a convergence between the rising force of Arab nationalism and *tiers mondiste* anti-imperialism in general.

Ross's conflation between the necessarily pro-Western monarchies of the Gulf and Jordan, and the rest of "the Arabs," totally ignores the broader cost and long-term consequences of Truman's policies. Furthermore, and contrary to Ross's thesis, it remains that Truman effectively set up another more powerful and more long-lasting template; that of a U.S. Middle East policy that was largely determined by Israeli

(Zionist) concerns, and shaped and formulated by the interaction between domestic electoral pressures, the powerful role of personal connections, and the pathology of the conflict as it is broadly construed in America; one in which by and large “the Arabs” in general and the Palestinians in particular have been consistently seen as the bad guys, and the Israelis as the good guys.

Limitations of “Israel’s Lawyer”

It would be a grievous mistake to underestimate the ties between the United States and Israel, as Ross himself amply demonstrates. There is a complex and profound matrix of common interests and perceived values that predates Israel and that continues to infuse the relationship at almost every level. Ross plays up those aspects of the relationship that he believes reflect what is best and brightest about them, and ignores their less salubrious aspects. Thus we learn nothing about the influence of the pro-Zionist inner circle surrounding Lyndon B. Johnson for instance: from the Rostow brothers, to Johnson’s friend and colleague Abraham Feinberg, to the former Irgunist and latter-day philanthropist Mathilde Krim and her husband Arthur Krim, who were both actually guests at the White House during the 1967 war.¹⁹ We don’t hear much of Henry Kissinger’s (only natural) sympathy for Israel, only his somewhat calculating attempts to pressure it.²⁰ We are repeatedly told of Caspar Weinberger’s antipathy toward Israel and Alexander Haig’s criticism of Israeli settlement activities, but not of the latter’s “green light” for Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon.²¹ In effect, we get no real appraisal of the weight and significance of the personal sympathy for Israel that has marked so many U.S. officials and diplomats who have been engaged with this problem, not least of whom Ross himself.

This should be no surprise, given Ross’s longstanding belief that the most effective way of managing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is by way of adapting U.S. policy to the exigencies of the Israeli government in power, regardless of its particular outlook or political character. The fact that approach has not been outstandingly successful does not seem to register, and Ross makes little if any attempt to examine or review his own record and weigh the balance of his achievements and failures. This self-assurance has allowed Ross to pursue the same path unhindered by experience and to block out whatever else he sees as irrelevant to his approach. Ross’s propensity to downplay the domestic factor may be contrasted with that of his erstwhile and longstanding colleague in government, Aaron David Miller. Miller authored a book after leaving the State Department titled *The Much Too Promised Land: America’s Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace*. In the book, Miller notes that in *The Missing Peace*,²² Ross’s own 872-page tome on the peace process, Ross says nothing about American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) or domestic pressures on policy makers. When

Miller asks Ross about this, the latter says that in his view the United States didn't do things *simply* [emphasis added] because of AIPAC or the Jewish community. Put this way (i.e., "simply"), Miller concurs, but adds: "But those of us advising the secretary of state and the president were very sensitive to what the pro-Israel community was thinking and, when it came to considering ideas Israel didn't like, too often engaged in a kind of preemptive self-censorship."²³

One may differ with Ross as well as Miller over the degree to which AIPAC and its associates have a firm grip over presidential and congressional policies. But it remains that via its hold over congressional electoral politics, the pro-Israel lobby can implant legislation that impedes the president's freedom of action and creates a public climate that has a direct bearing on the president's tone and bearing.²⁴ Certainly U.S. presidents themselves have felt the pressure, even if they have not always responded to it or been willing to do its bidding.

Over and above the lobby and congressional pressures, it may be worth noting here that Miller makes an extraordinary confession to which Ross appears oblivious, and that points to another perhaps even more profound structural flaw at the heart of American Arab-Israeli policy making. Talking of the U.S. Middle East team under Clinton, but in words that are by no means exclusive to that era, Miller notes that:

Whatever else we disagreed on, Dennis [Ross], Martin [Indyk], and I brought a clear pro-Israel orientation to our peace-process planning. Dennis often told me that Israelis saw him as the Palestinians' lawyer, and I know he believed it, but I chuckle now when I think about it, because the Palestinians never regarded him in that way. *In truth, not a single senior level official involved with the negotiations was willing or able to present, let alone fight for, the Arab or Palestinian perspective* [emphasis added]. Under Bush and Baker, the administration's four key advisors were also American Jews, but the secretary and president provided the necessary checks and balances to ensure that policy remained fair. At Camp David in 1978 Sam Lewis, then ambassador to Israel, presented [Menachem] Begin's perspective when necessary and people listened. The Clinton administration offered no comparable voice for the Arabs.²⁵

One could add, neither has any administration before or since—with the possible exception of the Obama presidency that has apparently had no vocal advocate for Israel since Ross's own departure from the administration in 2011.²⁶

In defense of his broad thesis, Ross points to a number of instances when a U.S. administration has taken a hard line on Israel. The problem is that most of the instances are so elusive and insubstantial as to be almost invisible, at least as far as "the Arabs"

were concerned. Getting the United States to temporarily withhold some addition to Israel's military arsenal such as in 1969, 1973, and again in 1981, only to be followed by an upgrade in military and strategic support and coordination, hardly seems to be cause for great satisfaction or appreciation of American evenhandedness from the Arab point of view.²⁷

One "battle" that is often held up as an example of U.S. willingness to face down the pro-Israel lobby was over the supply of hardware to Saudi Arabia. Concerning Ronald Reagan's tussle with the lobby over the sale of (unarmed) early warning AWACS aircraft in 1981, Ross writes:

It's tempting when we read [Reagan's complaints about the pro-Israel lobby] to overstate the influence of these supporters of Israel. In reality they have never driven basic policies, even as presidents have become more mindful of them. To be sure, the congressional capability to respond to Israel's assistance needs or initiate programs that benefitted the Jewish state had become far stronger by Reagan's time. But Congress's ability to block actions presidents want to take was far more limited. [Jimmy] Carter could overcome opposition to the sale of F-15s to the Saudis and Reagan would do so as well with the AWACS.²⁸

A number of points are worth making here. First, despite AIPAC and its supporters' claims, the sale of hardware to Saudi Arabia did not represent any credible threat to Israel, as the Reagan administration insisted at the time.²⁹ While AIPAC's attempt to twist the president's arm may not have succeeded, thereby damaging the lobby's standing in the process, no vital or even significant Israeli interest was at stake. Saudi Arabia has never been a military party to any conflict with Israel, and was at that point in time preoccupied with the consequences of the overthrow of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran. From an Arab perspective, the message could be read in a totally different manner: Reagan (as Carter before him) was only able to face down the lobby on a tangential and relatively secondary matter of no real consequence as far as Israel was concerned. And perhaps even more importantly, then and now, is that such battles with AIPAC tend to distract the executive and force it to expend political capital on a marginal affair, thus eroding its will and readiness to take on the lobby on other, more salient issues. In this respect, the lobby's deterrent power can be as effective as its persuasive capabilities.

But Ross's notion of "no price" is questionable, even in relation to Saudi Arabia. That the Saudis (and other U.S. allies) maintained their relations with Washington despite its bias towards Israel is a matter of hard political fact. Yet, when the Saudis did

kick back, most significantly with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries oil embargo amid the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Ross dismisses this as a relatively insignificant and passing phase.³⁰ In 2001, when the Saudis threatened to “reevaluate” their relations with the United States due to Israeli actions in the occupied territories at the height of the Second Intifada, Washington took this seriously enough to issue the first formal U.S. adoption of Palestinian statehood and self-determination to placate Riyadh.³¹ In neither case did matters approach a total disassociation or breakdown of Saudi relations with Washington, but the question arises as to exactly what political damage the United States would have to incur so as to meet Ross’s criteria of a threat to U.S. interests.

America and 9/11

Almost seventy years on, there seems to be little point in lamenting American bias toward Israel or pretending that this is some great discovery.³² But simply swatting the fact of bias aside is not very useful either. Whatever the lobby’s final sway over policy making, the extensive human and cultural contact and overlap, the political sympathy and perceived identification, the background and education and cultural conditioning of the leading players, all of which have flowed copiously in one direction, it is hardly surprising that there is no equivalent or balancing mechanism that operates in the opposite direction—except for the occasional presidential defiance or mulish resistance. Bias is not just systemic; it is woven into the very fabric of U.S.-Israeli relations and thus seems hardly worth protesting. What really rankles is not that Ross seeks to rationalize it, but his suggestion that this is both cost-free and in America’s interest.

Even if we were to concede that U.S. intimacy with Israel can be a useful path to extracting Israeli concessions in theory (a notion that some Arab leaders have espoused), the evidence of almost seventy years of U.S. policy is that this rarely, if ever, manifests itself in any meaningful manner in practice. Indeed, the opposite is the case; whenever the United States has raised its tone or wagged its finger at Israeli actions, it has backed down with nothing to show for its ire. Even the Obama administration, which has seemingly been the least susceptible to Israeli persuasion, rapidly retreated from its initial high tone on Israeli settlement activities, and has amply compensated for any apparent cooling in personal and political relations between Washington and Tel Aviv by offering Israel unprecedented military support and aid.

Since Dwight D. Eisenhower effectively gave Israel an ultimatum to withdraw from the Sinai in the 1956 Suez Crisis, there have been few exceptions to this rule. One anomaly that is usually cited is George H. W. Bush’s battle over the Madrid Peace Conference of 1991 and the Housing Loan guarantees as conducted by Secretary of

State James Baker; yet all of Bush/Baker's powers of persuasion and readiness to maintain distance—indeed their pressure on Israel—were the product of a unique moment of peak U.S. global power and were directed at a matter of process rather than substance; namely, simply getting the Yitzhak Shamir government to turn up in Madrid. The tough talk—“The phone number is 202-456-1414,” Baker said during a House Foreign Affairs Committee meeting in remarks clearly directed to Shamir. “When you're serious about this, call us.”—culminated in the Israelis attending the Madrid conference.³³

What seemed like a promising moment soon passed, with Bill Clinton's defeat of Bush in the 1992 presidential election. The incoming administration, with Ross serving as Clinton's special Middle East coordinator, was so solicitous of Israel's needs and views that the prospects of peace on two fronts, Syria and Palestine, were virtually damaged beyond resuscitation since.

In *Doomed's* account of seven decades of U.S.-Israel relations, Ross fails to mention some of the most obvious and incontrovertible facts. Israel has received more U.S. aid than any country or foreign recipient around the globe and currently gets over half of all American foreign military aid, while still asking for more.³⁴ It has closer relations and more special military privileges and access to U.S. weaponry than any other U.S. partner. It has been afforded virtually total protection by Washington at the United Nations and all other international agencies (such as the International Criminal Court). Israel's main policy planks have been consistently adopted by Washington: “No to the PLO” (U.S. policy before 1988); “No to a Palestinian state” (formal U.S. policy until the George W. Bush administration in 2001); “settlements are not illegal” (Reagan administration); accepting settlements as a *fait accompli* (George W. Bush letter to Ariel Sharon in 2004); “no return to the 1967 lines” (Obama statement in 2011).

If such American policies were driven by Washington's fear of losing “the Arabs,” as Ross claims, it is worth asking what a deliberate policy bent on antagonizing the Arab World would look like. In Ross's view, far from being the region's central issue, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has not really been that much of a problem for “the Arabs,” and those in the United States who have believed otherwise, were (and still are) seriously mistaken. True, one would be hard pressed to claim that this conflict is at the center of *all* the storms sweeping through the region today (or during the last seven decades, for that matter). But putting aside “the Arabs” for the moment, one critical reason why the conflict remains a core issue is precisely because of its domestic salience and centrality in the United States itself. One could wonder why Ross and so many other U.S. officials and politicians have dedicated so much effort to resolve it otherwise.³⁵

Ross's definition of "the Arabs," in fact, is problematic. The "Arabs" he has in mind seem to be mainly the Saudis (and sometimes other unnamed Gulfies) and only occasionally the Egyptians and Jordanians. It is clear that, for Ross, the Saudis are paramount.³⁶ One could understand this in terms of hardcore U.S. national interests (i.e., oil), but it is a dangerous assumption to make, since "the Arabs" are neither coterminous with the Saudis in general nor with the Saudi ruling family in particular. Ross basically ignores the vast ocean of Arab popular sentiment outside the Saudi and Gulf ruling families. To suggest that U.S. policy toward Israel has had no impact on America's standing in the area (and indeed across the Islamic World) not only reflects a singular detachment from political reality, but veers towards a veritable blindness and misreading of what the region's dynamics really mean. A cursory glance at the Arab press or a passing acquaintance with the Arab street would offer abundant evidence that the years of U.S. support for Israel have generated a bedrock of Arab hostility and anger, not only stemming from moral outrage at America's (and the West's) bias, double standards, and hypocrisy, but also from the indubitable reality that tens of thousands of Arabs (but admittedly not too many Saudis) have been killed by U.S. hardware bountifully supplied to Israel over the last five decades.

Perhaps one egregious example of Ross's blindness is worth highlighting. According to Ross, the State Department's view of the September 11 attacks assumed that they needed to be understood in the context of the deep antipathy in the Islamic World toward the United States because of U.S. support for Israel. Ross complained that "it mattered little [to the State Department] that Osama bin Laden's desire to attack the United States was not driven by Israel. He was far more motivated by his desire to remove 'iniquitous' Arab regimes that we backed—the Saudis, the Egyptians, the Jordanians—which he felt survived only because of the United States."³⁷

Bin Laden was no great fan of the Saudi regime (or any other Arab regime for that matter), but it may be worth casting a glance at what Bin Laden actually said, as opposed to what Ross claims to be his "real" motivation. Bin Laden's first "Declaration of War" in 1996 made clear the link between his disdain for the Saudi regime and U.S. support for Israel.³⁸ In his "Open letter to America" in 2002, he offered an even clearer and more explicit answer to the question of why he attacked the United States:

The answer is very simple: because you attacked us and continue to attack us. You attacked us in Palestine ... the creation and continuation of Israel is one of the greatest crimes, and you are the leaders of its criminals. And of course there is no need to explain and prove the degree of American support for Israel. The creation of Israel is a crime that must be erased. Each and every person whose hands have become polluted in the contribution towards this crime must pay

its price, and pay for it heavily ... the blood pouring out of Palestine must be equally revenged. You must know that the Palestinians do not cry alone; their women are not widowed alone; their sons are not orphaned alone.³⁹

Bin Laden enumerates other injustices that have motivated the attacks, including the U.S. intervention in Somalia, alleged Western support for Moscow in Chechnya, and for New Delhi in Kashmir. But it is Palestine that he returns to repeatedly, finally issuing a warning:

With your help and under your protection, the Israelis are planning to destroy the Al-Aqsa mosque. Under the protection of your weapons, Sharon entered the Al-Aqsa mosque, to pollute it as a preparation to capture and destroy it. These tragedies and calamities are only a few examples of your oppression and aggression against us. It is commanded by our religion and intellect that the oppressed have a right to return the aggression. Do not await anything from us but Jihad, resistance, and revenge. Is it in any way rational to expect that after America has attacked us for more than half a century, that we will then leave her to live in security and peace?⁴⁰

It could be argued that this was no more than a staged address designed to play on U.S. sentiments and to drive a wedge between the West and Israel. But even if so, this would not negate the view that Bin Laden was motivated at least in part by U.S. policies toward Israel, and that his views on Palestine cannot be totally ignored as a matter of principle, simply because the “State Department Arabists” believed there was some credence to the view that “the Arabs” were disturbed by U.S. support for Israel.

Arabs Are Angry, So What?

Given that Ross has forty years of dealing with the Middle East, one is hard pressed to say anything but that Ross simply doesn’t get it. It is almost surreal to have to argue that there is more to the Arabs than either the Saudis or the pro-Western regimes, who by definition are unlikely to desert the West and who have—as Ross may well be right in suggesting—no other viable alternative anyway.⁴¹

Anyone who knows the area, who has lived there, who has had contact with its ordinary citizens of any class or standing, simple or sophisticated, would know exactly how “the Arabs” feel about U.S. support for Israel. Ross seems to think that his contacts with certain Arab leaders or officials have given him some privileged insight into how they “really” feel about Palestine or U.S. support for Israel, but the extent of his misjudgment in this case can only be described as depressing; forget the

standard journalistic “taxi driver” test, even a sample reading of U.S. polls of popular Arab sentiment reveals the extent to which Arab hostility toward the United States is driven by the perception of U.S. bias in favor of Israel.⁴²

One may of course say, so what? So “the Arabs” are angry, but nothing ever comes of it. But that is not Ross’s position; rather, he seems to put a great deal of importance on Arab sentiment when it comes to issues that do not pertain directly to Israel. Take his continuing concerns about Iran, for example. A repeated theme in his prescription for U.S. policy toward Iran (including in the Syrian crisis) over the past few years is the need to keep the “Sunnis” on board.⁴³ Once again, Ross seems to mean the Saudis, since he appears not to recognize that a good slice of the Arab “Sunni” world is not so keen on Saudi policy in Syria or its stance toward Iran. Two major Arab Sunni powers, Egypt and Algeria, do not share Riyadh’s antagonism toward Bashar Al-Assad and have not adopted the same sectarian-based stance toward Iran. “Sunni” Morocco has remained largely outside the fray, despite its royal regime’s close ties with the Gulf monarchies. Even in the Gulf, “Sunni” Oman has taken a strong dissident view regarding both Iran and Syria, and both “Sunni” Kuwait and “Sunni” United Arab Emirates have a different view of Syria than Riyadh. It seems to have escaped Ross’s notice that Saudi Arabia does not represent the Sunnis and the “Sunnis” are not all in the same boat anyway.⁴⁴ He also seems to think that, whereas there is no need to appease “the Arabs” when it comes to Israel, the failure to do so would be a fatal mistake when it comes to Iran.

Yet even if one were to concede that U.S. pressure on Israel has not brought it any Arab gain or its absence any loss, it has also—on the rare occasions it has been deployed—not had any negative effect on relations with Israel either. In other words, the occasional pressure deployed on the Israeli side has had no discernable or long-term ill effect on U.S.-Israeli relations. From this perspective, one could also suggest that in the very few instances when pressure has been seriously applied, Israel has given way, with Eisenhower in 1956, Carter in 1978,⁴⁵ and George H. W. Bush in 1991.

Be that as it may, “no daylight” is not a policy but an article of faith; an ideological commitment, rather than a sound political judgment. From it follows the idea that *any* difference with Israel is detrimental to the United States, an assumption that does not seem to apply to any other country or issue. From it also follows that Israel has the first right of refusal of any U.S. proposal—the so-called “no surprises” policy. This has been in effect since the Gerald R. Ford-Yitzhak Rabin letter of 1975.⁴⁶ But “no surprises” effectively also negates the principle of an independent American position. If every serious U.S. initiative has to pass through the sieve of Israeli prior approval, then the United States loses all agency. It becomes merely a conduit for repackaged Israeli policies. The parties might as well deal with each other directly;

indeed—whatever else may be said about Oslo, the fact that it was concluded behind Washington’s back at a time when the United States was ostensibly in full charge of the peace process (with Ross at the helm) offers eloquent evidence as to Washington’s limitations when acting, in Aaron David Miller’s phrase, as “Israel’s lawyer.” Ross’s protective instincts of Israel have effectively sought to turn “no daylight” into an axiom. His broad approach has consistently been that of working within the parameters set by the Israeli government of the day (regardless of its politics) and seeking to adjust U.S. and Arab policies accordingly.⁴⁷

In keeping with his effort to downplay the significance of domestic politics in U.S. decision-making, Ross says very little about the rise of the religious right and its insidious influence on the Republican Party and on broad sectors of the American electorate. It would have been useful to know what he thinks about the role of kingmakers such as Sheldon Adelson and the influence of the Super PACS, of Irving Moskowitz’s private funding of the settlement enterprise, and the fact that serious politicians feel that they have to bend before the pernicious role of certain individuals, let alone the organized pressures of the lobby (such as former presidential candidate New Jersey Governor Chris Christie’s groveling apology to Sheldon Adelson for referring to the occupied territories as “occupied,” and Adelson’s political beauty contests on Israel’s behalf). While given cursory mention, Ross does not seriously address the implications of the changes within the U.S. Jewish community and the growing alienation of young Jews not just from Israel, but from the historic Zionist narrative.⁴⁸ He skirts over the potential consequences of the growing divide between Democrats and Republicans and the fact that Israel has become more and more of a partisan issue as a younger generation of Democrats appears to be less inclined to follow the same Trumanesque path as its predecessors. In a brief paragraph at the end of the book, Ross’s recipe to meet these challenges is predictable: better Israeli public relations and outreach, less partisan division, and a new U.S.-Israeli stab at peacemaking—not much that has not been tried before.⁴⁹

In *Doomed*, Ross is repeatedly critical of successive U.S. administrations, but one finds hardly a whisper against any Israeli government. He worries more about the fact that Israel’s concerns are losing traction on the international scene and that the Palestinians have become “far more adept at presenting themselves as victims” rather than the corrosive impact of almost fifty years of injustice and occupation.⁵⁰ In looking ahead, Ross wants to believe that, like some love-struck, democracy-hugging couple, Israel and the U.S. are “doomed” to fall into each other’s arms; this, at a point when the former is in full flight from its self-professed democratic ideals towards ethnic retrenchment, national/religious insularity, even open racism towards its Arab minority. A hardheaded examination of the long-term political, demographic, and ethnic

changes in both countries and their future trajectory does not bode well for the kind of relationship Ross seeks to uphold as the debate sparked by 2016 presidential candidate Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Party indicates. Ross simply does not want to admit to the fact that the Israel he believes in seems to be rushing headlong towards a darker and more unfamiliar place. Rather than a searching meditation on the nature of the U.S.-Israeli relationship, he ends up with a series of talking points for those seeking to deflect any differences between the two sides. It may be worth bearing in mind that “doom” is more usually associated with failure or disaster, and that “success” is rarely preordained.

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- 1 Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 4–5.
 - 2 *Ibid.*, 317.
 - 3 This theme is taken through twelve presidencies. See summary in Chapter 12 on Lessons. *Ibid.*, 393–99.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, 407–08.
 - 5 There is a voluminous literature on the Truman administration and Israel. Much of the following account is based on John B. Judis, *Genesis: Truman, American Jews, and the Origins of the Arab/Israeli Conflict* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).
 - 6 *Ibid.*, 200–01, 204.
 - 7 *Ibid.*, 208–09.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, 226. Ross naturally notes such instances as well, see Ross, *Doomed*, 12.
 - 9 A key insider account is that of State Department senior official Evan M. Wilson, *Decision on Palestine* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1979) reissued as *A Calculated Risk* (Covington: Clerisy Press, 2008). See also Walid Khalidi, *From Haven to Conquest* (Beirut, 1970), 481–737 for much more on the Truman administration and the politics of partition.
 - 10 The famous Rowe memorandum. See the authoritative biography by David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 590–91.
 - 11 Only later when dealing with the Eisenhower administration, does Ross acknowledge that Niles and Clifford were “strong advocates” of Israel. See Ross, *Doomed*, 47.
 - 12 Judis, *Genesis*, 198 states, “Lowenthal was in the White House so often that Truman thought of him as being on his staff, even though he was not.”
 - 13 *Ibid.*, 198, 243, 317.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, 316.
 - 15 Such as his former business partner Eddie Jacobson. See McCullough, *Truman*, 599.
 - 16 See Khalidi, *From Haven to Conquest*, 703–45.
 - 17 McCullough, *Truman*, 603–04.

- 18 Ross, *Doomed*, 18. Judis's 373 pages of close argument, documentation, and analysis get one footnote appended to the above Clifford quote, saying that "this is contrary to Judis's argument." Judis is thus dismissed as a "revisionist," while Clifford's self-serving testimony is taken at face value. McCullough, Truman's most distinguished and non-partisan (as far as the Arab-Israeli conflict is concerned) biographer appears considerably closer to the "revisionists" in his summary of the Truman legacy on Palestine. Noting Niles and Clifford's Zionist contacts and the significance of the Jewish vote and Jewish donations to the Democrats as well as the Republicans' willingness to align themselves with the Zionist cause for electoral benefit, McCullough adds that "popular support for a Jewish homeland was overwhelming. As would sometimes be forgotten it was not just American Jews who were stirred by the prospect of a new nation for the Jewish people, it was most of America." McCullough, *Truman*, 596.
- 19 See Donald Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985). For more on Johnson's inner circle, see Grace Halsell, <http://www.wrmea.org/1993-june/how-lbj-s-vietnam-war-paralyzed-his-mideast-policy-makers.html>.
- 20 Ross, *Doomed*, 137.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 182–83. By way of contrast, see the account of Haig's "green light" by Israel's foremost military commentators Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 72–77. Ross's account of 1982 also misses a crucial link in the story: The attempted assassination of Israel's ambassador to the UK was organized by the Abu Nidal group precisely in order to implicate the PLO in a conflict with Israel. Ross ignores this entirely, *Doomed*, 192–93.
- 22 Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004)
- 23 Aaron David Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land* (New York: Bantam, 2008), 122–23. Working with Ross for much of the time, Miller was one of the main players in planning and executing U.S. Mideast policy over twenty years of diplomacy.
- 24 Funding is a key issue here. U.S. funding to the PA would be cut off if the PA were to enter a national unity government with Hamas, for example. Anyone in any doubt about the cumulative impact of the bias deeply embedded in Congress's output can refer to the Institute for Palestine Studies' *Congressional Monitor*. <http://www.congressionalmonitor.org>.
- 25 Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land*, 243–44. Miller's words written in 2008 appear to have done little to move Ross in the interim. Perhaps it is no coincidence that a decade of their intimate working relations secures only one passing mention in the 408 pages of *Doomed*.
- 26 Ross, *Doomed*, 360–62.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 111–12, 118, 126, 151, 187, 190.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 216.
- 29 Indeed, in an echo of the latter battle over how to deal with Iran, the Reagan administration was arguing that these weapons were part of a regional "strategic consensus" that included Israel and Saudi Arabia, aimed at the Soviet Union. See William Quandt's authoritative *Peace Process* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1993) 338–39.
- 30 Ross, *Doomed*, 132.

- 31 Ibid., 303–06. Ross suggests that Washington’s drift towards Riyadh was only stemmed by the events of 9/11.
- 32 The question of U.S. bias has been addressed at length by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt in *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).
- 33 Miller offers a good account of the Baker approach in *The Much Too Promised Land*, 191–234. It is also worth remembering that George H.W. Bush offered Israel a long list of services in compensation for Madrid and the first Gulf war. See Ross, *Doomed*, 222–23.
- 34 See Jeremy Sharp, *US Foreign Aid to Israel*, Congressional Research Services, June 2015. <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf>.
- 35 Ross now seems to believe that a solution “would *not* be a game changer in the region” [emphasis in the original]. *Doomed*, 407.
- 36 For examples see Ross, *Doomed*, 178, 405, 397–98.
- 37 Ibid., 309.
- 38 “It is incredible that our country is the world largest buyer of arms from the USA and the area biggest commercial partners of the Americans who are assisting their Zionist brothers in occupying Palestine and in evicting and killing the Muslims there, by providing arms, men, and financial supports.” See the full English text as published by PBS. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military-july-dec96-fatwa_1996/.
- 39 See the full English text in the UK’s *Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/24/theobserver>.
- 40 Ibid. See also analysis of internal Al-Qaeda documents captured in the 2012 raid that killed Bin Laden and that stress the need to highlight the Palestinian cause and counter the impression that the organization is not interested in Palestine. <https://consortiumnews.com/2012/05/27/how-al-qaeda-exploits-palestine-cause/>.
- 41 Ross, *Doomed*, 207.
- 42 Just a random selection of recent opinion polls that show that its support for Israel is a constant source of popular Arab antagonism towards the U.S. despite other concerns over U.S. policy in the area since the Arab Spring events. See <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/zogby-poll-arabs-oppose-us-military-syria.html>. Also <http://www.voanews.com/content/arabs-ire-directed-at-us-policy-not-obama-poll-shows/1930430.html>. And <http://www.voanews.com/content/arabs-discouraged-by-us-policies-opinion-poll-says-100121494/172234.html>.
- 43 See for example <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-strategy-for-beating-the-islamic-state>. See also <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/01/04/saudi-arabia-a-dangerous-ally/the-saudis-are-rightly-concerned-about-iran>.
- 44 See Tarek Osman’s piece in this publication, <http://www.thecairoreview.com/tahrir-forum/saudi-arabia-is-not-sunni-central/>.
- 45 Carter applied real pressure at Camp David in 1978. Begin was convinced that he was facing a serious downgrading of U.S.-Israel relations if he didn’t comply. See Lawrence Wright’s recent detailed account of Camp David, *Thirteen Days in September* (London: Knopf, 2014).
- 46 Ross, *Doomed*, 319

- 47 Ibid., 407. His views have not gone without challenge from his own colleagues. Miller sums Ross up as follows: “Dennis like myself had an inherent tendency to see the world of Arab-Israeli politics from Israel’s vantage point rather than from that of the Palestinians. Not that he didn’t understand Arab or Palestinian sensitivities. But his own strong Jewish identity and his commitment to Israel’s security combined with a deep conviction that if you couldn’t gain Israel’s confidence you had zero chance of erecting any kind of peace process. And to Dennis achieving this goal required a degree of coordination with the Israelis, sensitivity to their substantive concerns and public defense of their positions.” Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land*, 205.
- 48 See Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism* (New York: Picador, 2013).
- 49 Ross, *Doomed*, 406.
- 50 Ross, *Doomed*, xii.