

# Obama's Tattered Middle East Policy

 [realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/10/13/obamas\\_tattered\\_middle\\_east\\_policy\\_128385.html](http://realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/10/13/obamas_tattered_middle_east_policy_128385.html)

By Peter Berkowitz

RCP Contributor

October 13, 2015

By any reasonable measure, the Obama administration's Middle East foreign policy is in disarray. Despite President Obama's determination to rebuild America's relationship with the Muslim world—dramatically manifested in his June 2009 Cairo speech—his administration's empty promises, gross miscalculations, and sudden reversals suggest that he and his team have substituted their wishes about how the Muslim Middle East ought to be for the realities of how the Muslim Middle East really is.

While the president steadfastly refuses to mention jihadism, wars fueled by Islamic extremism rage throughout the region. Time and again, Obama administration policies have made matters worse.

In September at the United Nations, the president announced that “realism dictates that compromise is required” to effect “a managed transition” from Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's rule. This appeal to moderation comes more than four years after Obama first called for Assad to step down and two years after Obama fecklessly declined to enforce the red line he had declared against Assad's use of chemical weapons. The Syrian civil war has since mushroomed into a staggering humanitarian catastrophe. It has left approximately 250,000 people dead; driven some 10 million from their homes; flooded neighboring Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey with refugees; and generated a continent-shaking wave of refugees rolling across Europe.

Four years after Western-leaning Libyan ruler Moammar Gadhafi was forced from power with U.S. help, that country has become a haven for Islamists and a battleground for two governments and dozens of armed groups. It's barely a country at all.

Almost four years after Obama's removal of troops from what he declared to be “a sovereign, stable, and self-reliant Iraq,” Baghdad is struggling to beat back ISIS's advances. Meanwhile Islamic State forces, which Obama compared in a January 2014 New Yorker interview to a JV squad, are also waging war in Syria and in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.

In an August speech, the president acknowledged that his nuclear deal's unfreezing of \$100 billion to \$150 billion of Iranian assets would assist the world's leading state sponsor of terror in pursuing its ambitions for regional hegemony. The president was correct, and it didn't take long: Iran has recently stepped up shipments of weapons, including anti-aircraft missiles, to its Lebanese client Hezbollah and, in late September, sent hundreds of troops to support Hezbollah ground operations in defense of Tehran's Syrian client Assad.

Then there's Israel and the Palestinians. In 2009, Obama focused 10 percent of his first United Nations General Assembly address on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Despite making the so-called peace process a priority, by the end of his first term he had nothing but vexation—not only in Washington but also in Jerusalem and Ramallah—to show for his efforts. In his second term, he lent the prestige of his office to Secretary of State Kerry's high-profile but ill-fated attempt to resolve the conflict. With Palestinian attacks on Israeli civilians mounting on both sides of the Green Line, relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority are decidedly more rancorous today than when Obama entered the Oval Office almost seven years ago.

Dennis Ross's new book, "Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship From Truman to Obama," does not purport to have all the answers about what has gone wrong in U.S. policy toward the Middle East since Obama entered the White House. But Ross's even-handed history does identify perhaps the single biggest factor in explaining U.S. missteps concerning Israel and the region as a whole.

A counselor and fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, Ross argues that since Harry Truman overcame State Department objections in 1947 to vote at the U.N. to partition the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea into an Arab state and a Jewish state, Washington has operated under three flawed assumptions about Israel and the broader Arab world.

The first is that U.S. cooperation with Israel comes at a high cost because it alienates America's Arab allies. The second is that by maintaining distance from the Jewish state, the United States can gain Arab trust and support. The third is that resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the key to enhancing American status in the region, and bringing a broader peace to the Middle East.

Over the course of 12 presidencies—and through provision of diplomatic, economic and military assistance to Israel and numerous peace initiatives—events, Ross shows, have repeatedly refuted these assumptions. Standing by Israel has cost America little among our Arab allies while advancing our national security interests. The United States has not gained when it has turned its back on the Jewish state. And notwithstanding the lip service they pay to the Palestinian cause, pro-Western Arab leaders are far more interested in their security and survival—which, in their judgment, depends on maintaining good relations with the U.S.

Yet presidents and their advisers have continued to embrace a false narrative that portrays Israel as a burden and overlooks "inter-Arab conflict."

Much of Ross's knowledge of contemporary Middle East politics comes from first-hand experience that crosses party lines. He got his start in government working in the Pentagon under President Carter and then, under President Reagan, did stints at the Pentagon and on

the National Security Council. Subsequently, Ross held senior positions in the George H.W. Bush administration, the Clinton administration, and the Obama administration. Intimately involved with Middle East diplomacy for more than 20 years, Dennis Ross is the Cal Ripken of the Israel-Palestinian peace process.

While emphasizing the liberal and democratic principles that undergird the U.S.-Israel relationship and the strategic benefits it has brought America during the Cold War and subsequently, Ross attests that Israelis can be difficult allies. Both Labor Party and Likud Party prime ministers, he writes, have failed to show their cards, have downplayed or ignored American interests, and have been overly cautious in the pursuit of peace with the Palestinians.

But Ross's overall account—particularly of the July 2000 Camp David negotiations hosted by President Clinton in which Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat rejected Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's generous proposal for a comprehensive peace—leaves little doubt that the primary reason the Palestinians do not have a state today is the intransigence of their leaders.

Despite recurring disappointments and meager short-term prospects, Ross remains committed to peace based on two states for two peoples. That unlikely event would hugely benefit both Palestinians and Israelis. But, because of the Middle East's larger logic, it “would *not* be a game changer in the region.”

To stop making matters worse, the White House must attend to that logic. America's many vacillations and wrong turns in dealing with the Sunni-Shia war that is roiling the Middle East—and shows no signs of abating—reflect the persistent inability of presidential administrations to understand the Arab and Muslim worlds and the conflicts internal to them.

Viewed from this illuminating altitude, the Obama administration's failures come into better focus. If the current president and his team are more culpable than their post-World War II predecessors, it's because they had the benefit of their accumulated experience—but didn't use it. Their inability to learn from history has come at great cost to the people of the Middle East, regional stability, international order, and America's vital national security interests.

*Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](http://PeterBerkowitz.com) and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.*