

**“Iran”
Featuring
Ambassador Dennis Ross
October 29, 2013**

Amb. Ross decided to provide in his comments a broader Middle East analytic framework, despite the narrower focus implied by his scheduled talk’s title. He then answered a number of questions from the audience about the ongoing multiple crises in the Middle East and how they interact.

Since the Arab *awakening* beginning in 2010, ordinary people in the region, indignant about blocked prospects for a satisfying life, rose up to topple or battle authoritarian leaders in republics such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen. With the passing of the iron rule and imposed order of leaders such as Ben Ali, Mubarak, Gaddafi, and others, largely artificial states fragmented.

- Amb. Ross predicted that Syria will never again look the way it is depicted on contemporary maps.

With state fragmentation came an institutional vacuum. And faced with such a vacuum, people fell back upon primordial identities defined by tribe, clan, and sect.

- Due to this institutional void, and the intense animosities and hatreds often shared by sub-state/sectarian groups, Amb. Ross predicted that the Middle East could see another 10-20 years of turmoil.

Amb. Ross told an interesting anecdote. In 2007 he was asked to comment on a T. E. Lawrence (of Arabia) map aiming to redraw post-World War I Middle Eastern state boundaries according to ethno-sectarian concentrations. Ross was not persuaded by the map in 2007, but admitted it makes more sense today.

Despite the overall picture of turmoil, Amb Ross implied that there were pockets of opportunity for achieving stability: namely, Iran and its nuclear program; and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

On Iran, Ross would not predict the likelihood of a deal (to roll back Teheran’s nuclear bomb-making capability), but he did cite 3 *clocks* all ticking to bring the Iranian nuclear issue to a head in the next 3-6 months.

- First was new Iranian President Rouhani’s clock. His election implies Supreme Leader Khamenei’s permission to seek a negotiated settlement (i.e. constrained nuclear programs for the ending of economic sanctions) with

Washington. Rouhani may have a honeymoon period during his first year before entrenched interests settle back in.

- Second, is Israel's clock. At some point soon, attacking Iran's nuclear infrastructure becomes infeasible (e.g. the reactor at Arak would create a Chernobyl-like situation).
- Third, is the US clock. The United States' policy is the *prevention* of nuclear-weapons capability. Soon, if/when Teheran achieves that capability, Washington's avowed policy of prevention would be widely seen to have failed.

On the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, regional conditions are conducive to negotiated progress.

- All of the attention on Syria takes the glare off of Israel-Palestine, thus creating some space to explore mutual concessions.
- Palestinian President Abbas' domestic antagonist, HAMAS, is somewhat in retreat, as Muslim Brotherhood-style groups have currently lost clout in the broader Middle East.

Additionally, Israel has signaled that it is serious about negotiated peace.

- PM Netanyahu has declared that Israel is not a bi-national state.
 - This implies the inevitability of a two-state - Israel and Palestine - solution.
- Tel Aviv / Jerusalem is releasing groups of violent Palestinian prisoners from incarceration.

After a half-century of conflict, however, widespread disbelief that progress is possible will probably require further steps to shock publics into perceiving that this time it's different.

Paul F. Herman, Jr.
Florida State College at Jacksonville