



## Mideast expert Dennis Ross coming to Queens

He'll detail the case he makes for new policies in his book on U.S. and Israel

Thursday, October 22, 2015

by **Victoria Zunitch, Chronicle Contributor**

The United States needs to give up longstanding but flawed assumptions that its relationships with Arab countries and successful policy in the Middle East are inextricable from the U.S.-Israeli relationship and the Palestinian issue, President Obama's former Middle East Adviser Dennis Ross argues in a new book, and instead understand that Arab nations care most about their own interests of security and survival.

"That was always going to take precedence," Ross said in a telephone interview with the Chronicle.

Ross, who also served in the administrations of Presidents Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, will discuss those ideas and more at the Central Queens YM & YWHA's "Author's Cafe" this Sunday, Oct. 25 at 3 p.m. Details are posted online at [cqy.org](http://cqy.org).

He has visited the CQY in the past and returns as part of a tour for his new book, "Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama," out this month from Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Three assumptions have echoed through the Middle East policy of every presidency since that of Harry S. Truman, Ross says. They are that the United States needs to keep a distance from Israel in order to gain favor with Arab countries, that cooperation with Israel will automatically entail costs to U.S.-Arab relationships, and that solving the Palestinian issue is a necessary requirement for the United States to secure a position of strength in the Middle East.

"History shows that these assumptions were fundamentally flawed," Ross says in the book. He provides examples in every administration when decisions to support Israel didn't result in the expected negative consequences with Arab nations, or when distancing from Israel didn't bring the hoped-for rewards.

A stark example is seen in the reaction of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Faisal, who was later to become King, when President John F. Kennedy became the first U.S. President to sell arms to Israel. Although then-Secretary of State Dean Rusk had advised against the sale on the grounds that it would harm the U.S. relationship with the Arabs, Faisal met with Rusk on the day the news of the sale was announced and expressed far greater concern about a coup taking place in Yemen, which was a possible threat to Saudi stability. Moreover, Ross writes, when Faisal met with Kennedy a week later, he pleaded with Kennedy not to stop arms sales to Israel but to stop aiding President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, who was seen as a threat to the region's monarchies.

Ross says Israel and its U.S. supporters need to educate minority communities about the Middle East and Israel's special status as the U.S. is becoming a "majority minority" country. They should also work against the impression that Israel is a partisan issue, elevate Israeli democratic values, in part by blocking right-wing efforts to pass restrictive legislation, and take an initiative on peace with the Palestinians

despite poor prospects of success in order to undercut those who want to use the issue to delegitimize Israel, he said.

Ross sees the U.S.-Arab relationship as one that will always remain above a floor it won't sink beneath and under a ceiling it won't rise above. He thinks the U.S. could shape its expectations differently if it gives up the three assumptions.

"You don't have to do something because you think the nature of the Arab response is going to be a certain way," Ross said.

He noted that with the breakdown of longtime authoritarian governments in the Arab world, the wars in Syria and Yemen, and other situations, Arab countries are struggling to find "a new basis for what will emerge as governments."

"Today, what they want from us has much more to do with their security and a feeling of confidence that we will be there if they need us" than it does our relationship with Israel, Ross said.

The United States should sharpen its focus on who its natural partners are in the region and figure out who it needs to strengthen, which would help to clarify how to proceed, he said.

"U.S. credibility and reliability are far more important to Arab countries than our closeness to Israel or any other factor," he said.