

On Dennis Ross as Special Envoy to Iran

Introduction

The lofty rhetoric has come and gone. Now comes reality. After many superb appointments, President Obama may be on the verge of choosing Dennis Ross as either special envoy to Iran or a top policy advisor on Iran – a move that could very well doom from the outset any hopes for a real change of course or rapprochement with Iran. Moreover, because Iran's cooperation is virtually essential to real progress in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Arab-Israeli conflict – all areas where Iran has enormous influence – the choice of Special Envoy to Iran could undermine prospects for success in these critical areas as well.

The importance of the latter point would be hard to over-state. Iran has made it clear on multiple occasions in both positive and negative ways that it can offer immensely valuable assistance when included as an ally (as it did in toppling the Taliban in Afghanistan after 9/11), but that it will spare no effort to spoil U.S. plans when isolated and ostracized as an adversary. Think Iraq, Afghanistan, Hamas, Hezbollah. Despite the loathsome rhetoric that routinely issues from Tehran, top experts who know the reality behind the rhetoric believe there is good chance for meaningful rapprochement with Iran, if the relationship is handled well, and that that might translate into assistance in managing the very difficult challenges posed by Hamas and Hezbollah to the Arab-Israeli peace process, among other things.

Unfortunately, Ross's open tilt towards the far-right in Israel and the ham-fished confrontational approaches and demeaning rhetoric that appear in Ross's public statements on Iran will ensure that the mere announcement of his appointment will reverberate as a provocation in Iran throughout the Middle East (apart from Israel). Moreover, the policies he favors are so completely out of touch with the realities of Iran that they are almost certainly doomed to fail, just as the Camp David process that he orchestrated failed. And when they fail they could well bring down not only hopes for a better relationship with Iran but prospects for progress towards peace in the Middle East as well. Here are a few facts journalists and columnists and advocacy groups should bear in mind as they discuss – and hopefully they will – the potential impact of Ross's appointment to a top position of authority on Iran.

Key Facts

(1) *Perceptions in the Middle East.* As mentioned, Ross is perceived in Iran and across the Middle East as far from an honest broker in Middle Eastern matters and virtually the hand-maiden of the far right in Israel.¹ He is also perceived as an ally of neo-cons in the U.S. and

¹Underlying this perception: his widely-reported and one-sided approach to diplomacy during the failed Camp David process; his prominent position at Washington Institute for Near East Peace in close association with several notable hawks and neocons such as Patrick Clawson; his work co-convening task forces that produce reports such as the report entitled, "How to Deepen U.S.-Israel Cooperation on the Iranian Nuclear Challenge"; his proposal in recent Senate testimony to use threats of Israeli air strikes on Iran as a conscious tactic to get Europe, Russia, and China to support toughened sanctions; his signing on to a manifesto drafted by a leading neo-con, Michael Rubin, and signed by several neo-cons hyping the nuclear threat from Iran, and calling for a fig leaf of diplomacy to be followed in short order by heightened sanctions, naval embargoes and if necessary airstrikes – a scenario and set of prescriptions not much different (apart from the fig leaf of prior but pointless talks) from what Richard Perle might recommend. Bipartisan Policy Center, *Meeting the challenge: U.S. policy toward Iranian nuclear development: Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Bipartisan Policy Center* (Bipartisan Policy Center, September 2008). Dennis Ross, *Choices and Strategies for Dealing with Iran, Testimony before the Senate*

essentially a champion (with a few tweaks) of the failed policies of the Bush Administration.² If Obama wants to signal a principled change in U.S. policy towards Iran and the Middle East, the choice of Dennis Ross as Special Envoy will signal exactly the opposite.³ No one, of course, suggests letting other countries' perceptions dictate our choice of emissaries. But there are many far more attractive options: Tom Pickering, Vali Nasr, Jim Dobbins, Shibley Telhami to name but four. If you want to succeed in a difficult venture with a tough message, and you have choices, why choose a messenger who carries all this negative baggage?

(2) *Ross knows little about Iran and seems tone deaf to its politics and perceptions.* One small but telling example: Said Ross in a recent op-ed: "Sharp sticks must be balanced by appetizing carrots in dealing with Iran" – a very unfortunate metaphor that Obama picked up (probably from Ross) and used recently on Meet the Press.⁴ Iranians have heard this lingo *ad nauseum* from the Bush Administration and their response is predictable: What do American's take us for: donkeys? As their Speaker of the Parliament, Ali Larijani, put it: "the language of carrots and sticks is obsolete and barbaric in relation to an ancient nation such as Iran. Instead of logical interaction based on international law, they carry a stick and want to force Iran to do what they want."⁵ Talking about other nations like donkeys demeans us and insults them to no purpose whatsoever.

(3) *Most important, Ross is pushing policies that misread Iran badly and are highly likely to fail if they are tried.*

a. *Ross seems unable to see the big picture with Iran.* His numerous writings on Iran focus almost exclusively on the nuclear issue, while virtually ignoring what matters most to General Petraeus and our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan: Iran's vast influence in its neighboring countries. The fact is, Iran and the United States have strongly overlapping but by no means identical interests in both countries. Iranian cooperation in Iraq and Afghanistan is both possible and vital – Iran played an invaluable role in helping U.S. forces topple the Taliban in Afghanistan after 9/11 and Iran strongly supports Maliki, America's ally, in Baghdad. Yet Ross's confrontational tactics will make it impossible to harvest those vital cooperative opportunities. Sadly, our troops and our prospects for success in Iraq and Afghanistan will pay a price for that misjudgment. Ironically, so will our chances for success on the nuclear issue: Iran experts with cooler heads and more sober judgment understand that cooperation in these areas of mutual interest could build confidence and help pave the otherwise rocky road to a deal on the nuclear issue.⁶

Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services and International Security (April 24, 2008). <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/RossSenateTestimony20080424.pdf>.

² To see why, click on www.unitedagainstanucleariran.com

³ See Hadi Nili, "Iranians' hope for U.S. policy shift dims," *Washington Times*, January 11, 2009, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jan/11/iranians-short-on-hope-for-change/>.

⁴ Dennis Ross, "Iran: Talk Tough With Tehran," *Newsweek*, December 8, 2008, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/171256/output/print>.

⁵ Larijani, during a Friday Prayers talk (December 5 <http://www.tabnak.ir/pages/?cid=28090>). Said Foreign Ministry spokesman in response to Obama's Sunday talk on Meet the Press "The discussion of carrots and sticks no longer has any use and the policy has proven to be a failure." (<http://www.rajanews.com/detail.asp?id=21168>).

⁶ William Luers, Thomas R. Pickering, and Jim Walsh, "How to Deal with Iran," *The New York Review of Books* 56, no. 2 (February 12, 2009), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22271>.

b. *Ross goals on the nuclear issue are vague.* Like Bush, Ross simply assumes that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons, even though our own intelligence community “assess[ed] with moderate confidence Tehran had *not* restarted its nuclear weapons program as of mid-2007.”⁷ Beyond that his goals are vague. He clearly wants Iran to surrender pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability though Ross never defines what that means. (If it means learning how to enrich uranium – the biggest obstacle to building a bomb – Iran already has that capability and no combination of bombing or sanctions will ever take that away.)

In any case, Ross seems intent on getting Iran to stop enriching uranium even though (1) Iran already has the knowledge, (2) Iran has been enriching for quite some time now, (3) Iran has declared the issue off the table, and (4) the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty entitles Iran to enrich uranium so long as this is for peaceful purposes, which Iran insists it is, and so long as Iran accepts full IAEA mandatory safeguards over all declared nuclear facilities, which Iran has done.

Strangely, Ross’s recent statements on the subject make no mention of the need to get Iran to re-adhere to the voluntary Additional Protocol to the NPT from which Iran withdrew in 2006 in a fit of pique over a prior round of U.S.-orchestrated sanctions. (The Additional Protocol allows anywhere, anytime inspections – a capability non-proliferation experts agree is the only way for the outside world to have any reliable chance of detecting clandestine operations, which is probably the most important objective at this point.) His writing leave the impression of someone who has not given much sustained or serious thought about what U.S. negotiating objectives on the Iran nuclear file should be.

c. *Ross’s approach to achieving his goals is most unlikely to work.* Ross clearly has thought a lot about pressure tactics and sanctions, but the results don’t inspire confidence. Most perplexing is his insistence on keeping the U.S. looking tough by pressuring Europe, Russia and China to agree to heightened economic sanctions on Iran – tightening controls in the banking sector, denying assistance to Iran in maintaining its oil and gas fields, and even perhaps cutting off supplies of refined petroleum products into Iran (a measure that would require a naval blockade and could well precipitate a war) – *all before or at the same time as the U.S. agrees to talk to Iran.*⁸ His theory: Bush failed because his carrots and sticks weren’t big enough.⁹ Ross’s idea of “change”, it seems, is to persuade Obama and the United States to be simultaneously more belligerent towards Iran – and nicer to Iran – than Bush was.

One is left to wonder why Ross believes that the right approach to statecraft is to be mean and nice simultaneously. Good cops and bad cops, after all, may work in tandem, but they are not normally in the room at the same time. Ross seems to believe that carrots and sticks complement each other when deployed simultaneously, and perhaps with donkeys they do. For most human beings, however, they tend to cancel each other out.

⁷ Director of National Intelligence, *National Intelligence Estimate. Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities*, November 2007, http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf.

⁸ Dennis Ross, “How to Talk to Iran,” *New Republic Online*, March 13, 2008, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC06.php?CID=1141>;

⁹ Ross writes, “Iran has continued to pursue nuclear weapons because the Bush administration hasn’t applied enough pressure—or offered Iran enough rewards for reversing course. The U.N. sanctions adopted in the past three years primarily target Iran’s nuclear and missile industries, not the broader economy. Hitting the economy more directly would force the mullahs to make a choice. Iran has profound economic vulnerabilities: it imports 43 percent of its gas. Its oil and natural-gas industries—the government’s key source of revenue, which it uses to buy off its population—desperately require new investment and technology.” Dennis Ross, “Iran: Talk Tough With Tehran,” *Newsweek*, December 8, 2008, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/171256/output/print>.

A much more sensible approach is to follow 8 years of Bush's bad cop by giving a good cop approach at least a decent interval to be tried alone -- keeping existing sanctions in place (with the prospect of removal at the satisfactory end of talks) but not leading a high-profile drive to tighten the screws while good-faith talks are ongoing. This is the approach that a number of pragmatic experts suggest. Ross, alas, is not one of them. One reason may be that he harbors little or no real faith in the efficacy of positive incentives to begin with. His writings, after all, never give them more than passing mention, whereas page after page is devoted to the ins and outs of tightening sanctions. His mouth mentions carrots; his faith is in the sticks.

Quite rightly, Ross asks, "Will [sanctions] produce a change in Iranian behavior?" Quite honestly, he answers, "There is no sign of it to date."¹⁰ In fact, economic sanctions have never worked in getting Iran to submit to Washington's wishes -- not once in 30 years of trying. Sure they produce grumbling by merchants in Iran -- and Ross hopefully reports their grumbling. But there is no evidence that punitive sanctions produce positive change of behavior. As we have just seen, the only discernible results from efforts to ratchet up sanctions so far have been *negative* -- Iran's withdrawal from the NPT Additional Protocol. Nice going.

Ross's sole example of the efficacy of economic sanctions applied to Iran in the past is a quite forthcoming offer of negotiations (almost promising major concessions) made by Iran to Washington during a very brief moment in history -- May 2003 -- when U.S. force of arms seemed invincible in the Middle East and Iran's leaders may have genuinely feared that Iran might be invaded next. (There was also a reformist president Khatami in place then who had long been calling for a "dialogue of civilizations.") From this episode, a case could be made for the power of fear of invasion; or for the power of an impulse to reform. What this episode says about the effectiveness of economic sanctions -- which were not particularly draconian then -- is anybody's guess.

Of course, for every argument that sanctions haven't worked, there is the ready comeback that they failed because they weren't tough enough. But when will it occur to Ross and his ilk that there may be *reasons* they weren't tough enough that remain relevant today?

For example, in recent testimony Ross bemoans the fact that the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate -- reporting that Iran appears to have suspended its nuclear weapons program -- had taken the sails out of efforts to get Russia and China and others to cooperate with sanctions. Why did that happen?

Perhaps the NIE simply gave them a handy pretext for not cooperating -- though if its influence was purely pretextual, why blame the NIE (pretexts are usually easy to find when there's a will to find them). A simpler and more plausible explanation is that Russia and China realized the anomaly of imposing great hardship on the Iranian people for alleged behavior by their leaders that quite possibly is not occurring. So long as that anomaly persists -- and Ross has no plan for removing it -- the United States has no principled argument for demanding Russian and Chinese cooperation with draconian sanctions on Iran. Ross is left treating Russia and China in the same way he proposes to deal with Iran -- brandishing carrots (tantalizing Russia with the hope that assistance on Tehran will translate into withdrawal of missile defense in Eastern Europe, etc.), and sticks (utterly fanciful threats of Saudi cutoffs of oil exports to China) in an effort to bribe or coerce behavior that cannot be achieved by arguments on the merits.

¹⁰ Id.

Supposing sanctions could be tightened, how would Iran respond? Here we encounter a second Rossian contradiction: in one breath he declares that Iran is so messianic and irrational that they might well commit national suicide if they ever got a nuclear weapon. In the next breath, he is insisting they are so calculating in a cost-benefit mode that a 20-30 percent curtailment of their gasoline imports will cause them to submit to outside pressures. Which is it?

Bottom line: Iran's leaders are proud and defiant. They have no shown absolutely no attraction to national suicide – au contraire – but they also demonstrated (in the Iran-Iraq War and on many other occasions) a willingness to endure (or allow their population to endure) great sacrifices rather than yield to what they see as external aggression. There is no good evidence for the proposition that any achievable set of U.S.-orchestrated economic sanctions is going to succeed in coercing Iran to yield to U.S. wishes.¹¹

Conclusion

People who understand Iran would not be so worried and perplexed by the stick-heavy approach favored by Dennis Ross if there were no other options. But there are other options, and that means there is a great cost to missing this once-in-an-administration, historic opportunity to get Iran policy right for a change.

Iran is the source of all manner of loathsome rhetoric aimed at the United States and Israel – it seems to be customary in the Middle East and elsewhere to heap calumnies upon one's adversaries. But Iran has also made recent peace overtures that U.S. has rebuffed. Iran and the U.S. have major common interests and they know it. Iran wants Western technology and an end to isolation; the U.S. wants Iran's cooperation in Iraq, Afghanistan and on the nuclear file.

What has been missing all of the last 8 years and much of the last 30 is a sustained effort by the United States to improve the U.S.-Iran relationship. To try goodwill -- as opposed to threats, sanctions, and subversion. To see if goodwill will indeed beget goodwill.

It may not be possible – Ross is right about that. Iran is tough customer and there are hardliners in Iran who will do all they can to subvert rapprochement as will hardliners in the United States. But after 30 years of failed efforts to sanction and coerce Iran, it is time to give diplomacy – real diplomacy -- a chance. That is most unlikely to happen with Dennis Ross as special envoy.

¹¹ Even the most draconian measure and the last best hope of the confrontationalists (a gasoline embargo designed to exploit Iran's temporary shortage of refinery capacity) would reduce Iranian supply of gasoline by only by about 30 percent, from a highly wasteful demand level based on highly subsidized, 40 cent a gallon gas. And Iranians, anticipating this contingency, have developed a very sophisticated, "smart card" rationing system that will ensure that the pain is felt by the people of Iran (who will blame the West) and not by the military or government elites. In fact, a petroleum embargo might well prove the best thing that ever happened to hardliners in Iran – giving them a high-profile, external scapegoat not only for the shortage of gas but for a plenitude of economic hardships caused by the leadership's own mismanagement.