Trump Win Could Lead Obama to Back 2-State Move at UN, Ex-Diplomat Predicts

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A looming Donald Trump presidency would make it more likely for lame-duck US President Barack Obama to support a United Nations Security Council resolution laying down the basic parameters for the creation of Palestinian state, a former top US official said Sunday.

“I suspect that if Trump wins, the president would be more inclined to go for a Security Council resolution to try to do something that binds, creates standards for the future that the next president couldn’t undo,” Dennis Ross said at a conference on the future of Zionism and the US-Israel relationship. “If Clinton wins, I suspect he [Obama] would be more sensitive to her concerns as to whether this helps or hurt her.”

Ross, who worked on Israeli-Palestinian issues for decades, including a two-year stint as special assistant to Obama and a year as special adviser to Hillary Clinton, said that the current president “would like to do something, leave some kind of legacy.”

Ross was speaking at a panel organized by the [second annual Zionism 3.0 Conference](http://www.timesofisrael.com/palo-alto-confab-to-take-penetrating-look-at-next-stage-of-zionism/), sponsored by The Times of Israel, at Palo Alto’s Oshman Family Jewish Community Center. The panel was moderated by this reporter.

Jerusalem has for decades relied on a tacit US policy of shielding Israel from resolutions at the UN Security Council, which are often described as one-sided. While Obama’s possible move would not reverse that stance, it would mark a significant departure, Ross noted. What Obama decides to do, though, he said, will likely be heavily influenced by the outcome of the presidential race.

Once the dust has settled following elections on November 8, Obama may use the opportunity as a lame duck to deliver a speech laying out parameters for a peace arrangement between Israel and the Palestinians, or even suggest a Security Council resolution defining those parameters, either to be proposed by the US or another country, Ross speculated.

The president’s speech, were he to make one, would very likely be balanced, Ross added, by equally addressing Palestinian concerns — borders and Jerusalem — and Israeli demands regarding security and the question of Palestinian refugees.

But any Security Council resolution introduced by another country would very likely emphasize the Palestinian demands over Israeli concerns, he said.

“Then the question becomes: if someone else introduces this as a resolution and it waters down the essence of what the president has offered, which would have been balanced between the two, does the US then veto it? That is going to be heavily influenced by the outcome of the election,” Ross said.

“I’m guessing he would be much more inclined to try to be proactive in terms of presenting something that could create standards for the future that the next president couldn’t undo,” he continued.

On Wednesday, [Obama is scheduled to meet Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu](http://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-obama-to-meet-in-ny-on-wednesday-report/) in New York at the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

In a statement Sunday, the White House indicated Israeli-Palestinian peace talks would play a central role in the conversation.

“The meeting also will be an opportunity to discuss the need for genuine advancement of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the face of deeply troubling trends on the ground,” said White House spokesperson Josh Earnest.

Netanyahu’s office, confirming the meeting, did not mention the conflict, but said the PM would thank Obama for a recent $38-billion 10-year defense aid package and would also discuss strategic ties.

Despite working for both Bill and Hillary Clinton during his decades as a diplomat dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Ross was hesitant to say explicitly which presidential candidate would be better for Israel.

“The way you want to judge both candidates is not necessarily based on what they say about Israel, but you want to judge them [based on] what’s their view of the world,” he said. “Are they approaching the Middle East in a way that ensures there won’t be vacuums? If you’re Israel what you want is an America that has a strong position in the Middle East because that makes you stronger.”

Israel and the Arab world do not want the US to withdraw from the region and leave power vacuums, Ross explained.

“If I were to look at the two candidates I’d ask: who is more likely to stay engaged in the region, understanding the dynamics of that region? Who is going to have a relationship with allies that can be dependable, and who’s not?”

#### ‘Criticism of Israel is not a substitute for a healthy relationship’

Other sessions at the day-long conference centered on the nature of ties between American Jews and the Jewish state, particularly the place of criticism of Israel within that bond.

Yehuda Kurtzer, the president of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, noted that the relationship between the two communities had become strained.

“Two generations ago, the State of Israel was probably the strongest organizing force for the American Jewish community,” he said. “Today, there is no stronger disorganizing force in Jewish life, no single greater source of tension in the American Jewish communal politics than the State of Israel.”

In his presentation, Kurtzer also argued against the often-used metaphor of Israeli and American Jews as part of a “family.” A secular Jew from California usually feels closer to his neighbor than to an ultra-Orthodox man in Bnei Brak with whom he has fundamental disagreements, even if he really wants to believe that the Bnei Brak man is family, he opined. “I am not sure that the metaphor of the Jewish people as a family has ever been true,” he went on.

Rather, Kurtzer suggested referring to Israeli Jews and American Jews as “mutual descendants of a shared ancestor.”

His father, Dan Kurtzer, a former US ambassador to Israel, argued that while security and economic issues affecting Israelis are clearly the sole responsibility of the government in Jerusalem, issues relating to the state’s Jewish identity are more complicated.

 “Some in Israel have sought to determine unilaterally, as a matter of Israeli policies issues that affect Judaism and things Jewish outside of Israel, such as basic identity questions of who is a Jew, questions of personal status, marriage divorce, conversions,” he stated.

“American Jews have said almost uniformly that these are not issues that cannot remain simply within the purview of the Chief Rabbinate of the State of Israel. For sure the Chief Rabbinate has something to say, as do other streams within Israel. But equally, we have something to say, whether we are Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, unaffiliated, whatever our inclinations are. Questions regarding Jewish life have to be shared responsibilities.”

Arguing that criticism and arguments shouldn’t be swept under the rug, Andy David, Jerusalem’s consul general to the Pacific Northwest, said Israel could still be a uniting factor for Jews on both sides of the ocean.

“No matter your color, your affiliation, your sexual orientation or the length of your beard… Israel, we can agree, is a place that can unite us. Sometimes, when you think about how you practice your Judaism, there are different sides of that equation that can hardly agree on anything,” he claimed. “But we can agree that we care for Israel. So Israel is not a force that splits us… that Israel can be the force that unites us.”

Writer Yossi Klein Halevi, a senior fellow at the Jerusalem-based Shalom Hartman Institute, also said that American Jews have the right — and even the obligation — to criticize Israeli government policies, yet added a caveat:

“Criticism is not a substitute for a healthy relationship,” he said, arguing that in certain circles he sees that bashing Israel — for some American Jews — has become the only way of relating to the state.

“What I need from American Jewish critics is a sense of understanding the agonizing complexities of Israel’s dilemmas, not to trivialize our dilemmas,” added Klein Halevi.