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Panel Talks Palestine Peace

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March 28, 2014 by [Sydney Winkler](#)^[2]

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A panel of leading Middle East experts spoke about the current Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations in the Reiss Science Building on Wednesday. The panel included Ambassador Dennis Ross, Ghaith Al-Omari and Jeremy Ben-Ami.

The event was sponsored by J Street U Georgetown, the Georgetown University Lecture Fund, Georgetown College Democrats and the Georgetown Program for Jewish Civilization.

“[The] panel was a strong step in advancing constructive conversations at Georgetown surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” J Street U Treasurer Elijah Jatovsky (SFS '16), who moderated the panel, wrote in an email. “It is the nuanced insight like that provided at the panel that can bridge gaps and lead to meaningful progression.”

Executive Director of the American Task Force on Palestine Al-Omari spoke out against the costs of the conflict.

“This is not a conflict we can afford to keep dragging on,” Al-Omari said. “We have seen many lives shattered by this conflict.”

Ambassador Ross, who is currently a professor in the School of Foreign Service, played a leading role in shaping U.S. involvement in the Middle East peace process under the Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. Ross explained the personal nature of the peace process.

“In an abstract way, you contribute to something called stability, but it’s completely abstract,” Ross said. “When I began to negotiate in the Middle East, I went from dealing with issues that were abstract to issues that were highly personal.”

Ben-Ami is founder and president of J Street, a pro-peace organization that advocates a two-

state solution as the means for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ben-Ami expressed a need for third-party involvement in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

“There has to be two states for two people, or else Israel loses fundamental character,” Ben-Ami said. “That simply isn’t going to happen without American involvement.”

Al-Omari echoed Ben-Ami’s commentary.

“Without a responsible third party, the two parties cannot get to it,” Al-Omari said. “They are unable to step back and do what they need to do to get out of the conflict.”

With an American-brokered peace framework soon to be presented to Israeli and Palestinian leaders, each panelist weighed in on the prospective two-state solution.

“I don’t believe if you miss this moment, it’s the end,” Ross said. “But I don’t think if you miss this moment, it’s a good thing.”

Ben-Ami and Al-Omari agreed that there is no viable alternative to a two-state solution.

“I do not see any other solution,” Al-Omari said. “One of the biggest concerns that I have is, those of us who would be in favor of a two-state solution ... we will not be motivated, but the others who are against it will be very motivated.”

Although the panelists represented a varied array of backgrounds, they all agreed on the importance of a two-state solution.

“The fact that these three leading Middle East experts, despite their diverse backgrounds, found so much agreement demonstrates the wide-spread support for and recognition that the two-state solution is the key to this conflict’s resolution,” Jatovsky said.

The panelists discussed whether Secretary of State John Kerry, who is currently in Jordan brokering a peace between Israel and Palestine, could achieve a successful solution.

“Even if Kerry produces a breakthrough, I think unless a breakthrough is accompanied by immediate steps by both sides to address the sources of disbelief, a breakthrough won’t happen right now any case,” Ross said.

Al-Omari argued that Israeli and Palestinian governments are perpetuating cynicism in the region.

“Yes, there is a lot they can do and no they are not doing it,” Al-Omari said. “Part of it is saying this is a good thing and part of it is distancing themselves.”

Al-Omari predicted that a watered-down document will be a consequence of this incompetence.

“The trick of what needs to be done is how do you get the parties — the leaders themselves — to accept this, own it and to identify this success as their success in political terms and the failure as their failure,” Al-Omari said.

Ultimately, the panelists were not optimistic about the current peace negotiations.

“I think one of the great risks of this round of talks is that one of the few strands of progress

can collapse,” Ben-Ami said. “The odds are that this doesn’t move forward.”

Ross explained that the regional culture and environment are important factors that need to change in order for an agreement to become more realistic.

“We do need to be doing things on the ground to change the climate so, when we buy the time, people have room to say, ‘Maybe there’s something going on in Israel,’” Ross said. “That’s the challenge we have right now.

Al-Omari disagreed with the other panelists about whether either party needs to desert its narrative in order to facilitate an agreement.

“I do not believe you should negotiate identity,” Al-Omari said. “Both sides need to show sensitivity.”

The panelists concluded on a positive note — a solution is possible regardless of whether the current talks are successful.

“[In the Middle East], what can go wrong usually goes wrong so I can’t sit up here and say, ‘I know it’s going to happen,’” Ross said. “But I can say, when all three sides don’t want a collapse, usually they find a way to manage.”

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