



OBAMA'S MISSED OPPORTUNITY

BY MICHAEL C HUDSON

While the world has been fixated on the wave of popular protest known as the “Arab awakening,” the region’s oldest flashpoint—the Palestinian-Israeli conflict—has been heating up again.

Perhaps inspired by citizen uprisings elsewhere Palestinians staged a dramatic and symbolic “return” to Israel by trying to peacefully enter it from four sides: Gaza, the West Bank, the Syrian Golan Heights and Lebanon. The day they chose to do this was May 15, “*nakba* day”, the day of “catastrophe” in 1948 when Israel was established, leaving some 750,000 Palestinians forcibly displaced. Israeli soldiers killed up to 10 Palestinians at the Lebanese border. They killed 20 and wounded 80 at the Gaza border. Dozens were wounded at the Syrian border in the Golan Heights. And on June 5, the anniversary of the 1967 war, Israeli troops killed 23 Palestinian protesters and wounded 350 trying to enter from Syria.

For its part the Israeli leadership gives no sign of softening its long-held positions. All this takes place against a backdrop of regional uncertainty: a change of leadership in Egypt, simmering popular protests in Jordan, bloody uprisings in Syria, and political paralysis in Lebanon.

So what has the world been doing about this? Until now not much. The U.S.-sponsored Palestinian-Israeli “peace process” is a joke. International diplomacy is, to put it politely, anemic. The United States has always claimed that it alone has the power to bring about a solution, although after 64 years of trying people are beginning to wonder. So what is Washington planning to do now as the situation worsens?

America has been extravagantly supportive of Israel ever since President Harry Truman raced to be the first country to recognize the new state in 1948. The degree of support has varied only marginally from president to president, yet with each new administration hope springs eternal: will the policy finally become more evenhanded?

Certainly the election of Barack Obama in 2008 raised hopes among those sympathetic to the Palestinian situation that things might change. And there were some hopeful signs. That Obama had actually had contact with a prominent Palestinian-American intellectual, Rashid Khalidi, when he was a community organizer in Chicago led observers to infer that he had at least heard “the other side of the story.” In a 2008 campaign speech before AIPAC he plainly endorsed a two-state solution: “...a Jewish state of Israel and a Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security.” And he went on to assert the seriousness of his commitment: “And I won’t wait until the waning days of my presidency. I will take an active role, and make a personal commitment to do all I can to advance the cause of peace from the start of my administration.” [[Obama speech to AIPAC, June 4, 2008](#)]

After his election, Obama gave his first interview to the Arabic satellite channel Al-Arabiyya and signaled his intention to deal with the Arab and Muslim worlds with respect and a willingness to listen. Another positive sign was his appointment of former Senator George Mitchell as the administration’s special representative for the

Middle East. Mitchell, of Lebanese descent on his mother's side, was regarded as relatively balanced on the Arab-Israeli conflict, compared to most members of the Washington political elite, especially congressmen. Mitchell was regarded with suspicion by the Israel lobby as "pro-Palestinian." And in June 2009 President Obama delivered an eloquent address at Cairo University elaborating the same themes. It seemed clear that he wished to undo the serious damage to America's credibility and influence in the region done by his neoconservative predecessor George W. Bush.

But at the same time the new president was sending seemingly contradictory signals. The incoming president was unwilling to forthrightly criticize Israel for the brutalities it inflicted on Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009. He elevated a hard-line Middle East advisor, Dennis Ross, who had arguably contributed significantly to the ultimate failure of the "Oslo Process" of the 1990s. He chose as his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whose enthusiasm for Israel knew no bounds when she was a Senator from New York, and who proceeded to take a hard line on Hamas's credible claims to be an authentic part of the Palestinian body politic. Symptomatic of the Administration's skittishness on Israel was its embarrassing failure to stand up to AIPAC's attack on Ambassador Chas Freeman, Obama's choice to head the National Intelligence Council, who was forced to withdraw his name from consideration.

In May 2009 Obama courageously declared that Israel's policy of settlement expansion was not conducive to resolving the conflict, and when Netanyahu defiantly ordered up new settlement projects on the eve of a visit to Israel by Vice-President Joe Biden in March 2010, the President was reportedly furious but did nothing concrete to show his displeasure. Indeed, in February 2011 he ordered the U.S. representative to the United Nations to veto a Security Council resolution condemning the illegal settlements. Meanwhile, the President's special envoy George Mitchell continued to shuttle between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, nominally under the aegis of the "Quartet" (the U.N., Russia, the E.U. and the U.S.), pursuing the "road map for peace" first outlined by President George W. Bush in 2002, but nobody seemed to notice.

On May 20, 2011 President Barack Obama delivered what was widely touted as a "reset" speech on US Middle East policy at the State Department. The president proclaimed "a new chapter in American diplomacy" intended to respond to "the extraordinary change" taking place in the region: "...the people," he said, "have risen up to demand their basic human rights." Admitting that America had in the past concentrated too narrowly on the pursuit of its basic interests—countering terrorism, try to stop nuclear proliferation, securing the free flow of commerce, safeguarding the security of the region; "...standing up for Israel's security and pursuing Arab-Israeli peace"—Obama now asserted that America faced "an historic opportunity" to support popular aspirations. What forms would this support take? The president offered verbal support for the popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and (in a more qualified way) Bahrain. He also promised financial and economic assistance for the new regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, and a trade and investment partnership initiative for the entire Middle East and North African region.

Obama concluded his speech by returning to "another cornerstone of our approach to the region," the Arab-Israeli conflict. Observers everywhere were watching carefully to see whether he would announce a new American approach to a struggle that decades of diplomacy have failed to end. Would the "reset" in U.S. Middle East policy extend to this issue? And if it didn't, would America be able to make good on its "historic opportunity" to align with the new popular forces shaping the region?

Initially, one might have answered *Yes*, especially when Obama said, "The borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps..." But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reacted furiously, and Israel's many supporters in Congress rallied behind Netanyahu's defiant declaration that Israel would accept no such thing. How would Obama respond? Instead of standing up to Netanyahu he once again hastened to assure him that he was leaving Israel plenty of room for maneuver in the negotiating process and that the U.S. would not pressure Israel to do anything that Israel might decide was against its interests. Thus the President continued to respond with meekness and weakness to Israel's rejection of what he rightly remarked was a fundamental parameter for peace going all the way back to U.N. Security Council Resolution 242 in 1967.

To be fair, President Obama continued to insist that the U.S. supported a meaningful, contiguous (though de-militarized) Palestinian state alongside Israel. Moreover, as Henry Siegman has noted, the speech "was important because it laid down certain markers." The time to press for a peace accord is *now*. American parameters for bilateral talks are *essential terms of*

reference. The starting point for talks about territorial swaps must be the 1967 lines. A peace accord must provide security arrangements for both parties and “full and phased’ withdrawal of Israel’s military forces from the West Bank.” [[Henry Siegman, “Can Obama Beat the Israel Lobby?” *The Nation*, May 25, 2011](#)]

But on the negative side, it was notable that he adopted the right-wing Israeli government’s new emphasis on the Jewishness of Israel, without regard for the large non-Jewish (Palestinian Arab) minority—some 1.2 million people or nearly 25 percent of Israel’s population. Crucially, Obama’s speech sidestepped the key issues of Jerusalem and the Palestinian right of return. He also berated the Palestinians for proposing to go to the U.N. and seek international recognition for a Palestinian state, as if the U.N. were enemy territory rather than the source of the international consensus embodied in Security Council resolutions 242 and 338. It was therefore hardly surprising that reaction in the Arab world was for the most part tepid. The speech ended with a whimper, not a bang, thus diluting the intended “reset” tone of the speech as a whole. And backtracking further, Obama addressed AIPAC a few days later and insisted that U.S. ties to Israel are “ironclad.” As Siegman observed, “The fatal flaw in Obama’s proposal is that it does not state clearly that rejecting his parameters will have consequences.”

As President Obama entered the final year of his term, preparing of course for the re-election campaign, it was disappointing that a man of his background and intelligence had not been able to change the course. Little wonder, then, that the Israelis are standing pat and the Palestinians have begun to look beyond Washington for help—lately to the U.N. where their quest for statehood has widespread support in the General Assembly. And, perhaps more importantly, the Palestinians are again looking to themselves—reunifying their leadership and mobilizing their people for peaceful protest.

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