

**Peace and Security in Israel and the Middle East - US Foreign Policy under  
Barack Obama**

**To what extent could Obama's Foreign Policy on the Israel / Palestine conflict be  
deemed a success?**

The long-standing dispute between the Israelis and the Palestinians has seen a bitter and tragic struggle lasting over decades, with neither side willing to compromise on their stance and a "talks-breakdown-violence pattern" re-occurring during the first decade of the twenty-first century (Ross, 2010:3). The history of the conflict is littered with violence and disagreements, with little progress made towards achieving peace. Since Obama came to office in 2009, he has committed himself to actively pursuing lasting peace and security within Israel and the Middle East (White House, 2010). This paper wishes to measure to what extent his policy could be deemed a success. This is crucial to know, as if there has been no measurable success, it would be arguable that a different approach to the situation is required altogether.

Historically, both the Israelis and the Palestinians believe it is their right to occupy Palestine. The Israelis believe it is their homeland, given to them following the Holocaust in WWII, and dating back to ancient times when it was known as Judea. The Palestinians argue that in fact they are entitled to the land, as after the Arabs conquered Palestine (the Romans had previously conquered Judea from the Jews), they inhabited it for over a thousand years. More recently in 1917, following the Balfour Declaration, Palestine was granted to Britain as a League of Nations Mandate to build a national home for the Jewish people. Despite Zionist pressure, Britain

stopped Jewish immigration to Palestine due to the resentment and resistance expressed by the Arabs. However, post WWII, the UN partitioned the land into Arab and Jewish states in 1947. Since then there have been several wars over territory. The Israelis have been largely dominant, expanding their state and creating hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees as a result. Disputes over territory and settlements, and the issue of an independent Palestinian state continue today.

The region is severely overcrowded with few resources, making daily life a struggle for many on both sides of the dispute. Israelis continue to build settlements in the west bank and an Israeli blockade of Gaza is still in place despite international appeals. “By the twenty-first century a considerable number of Israelis and Palestinians believed they were caught up in a struggle that would never end” (Ross, 2008:272). Obama is correct, in my view, that it is essential to bring hope, peace and security to the region – the resentment, anger and violence cannot continue grow in this way without serious consequences. Without progress, radical groups such as Hamas will only get stronger, forcing Israel into a “South-African style struggle” (former PM Ehud Olmert, 2007 - Walt, 2009).

In January 2009, on his second day in office, Obama appointed a Special Envoy for the Middle East. In June 2009, he gave a speech on New Beginnings in Cairo, stating “The only resolution is for the aspirations of both sides to be met through two states, where Israelis and Palestinians each live in peace and security” (White House: 2009). Previous peace talks have not resulted in a permanent solution however, “these days Israel is much more amenable to outside involvement” (Guardia, 2007:498), Progress, perhaps, is more achievable than before. With this in mind, it is important to assess

the progress made by Barack Obama's and his Foreign Policy since he came into office in 2009. The conflict is a source of concern across the Arab world and the US's policy and perceived bias towards Israel (Mearsheimer, Walt: 2008) has contributed towards it being a target for various militant Islamic groups.

Having justified why this is such a crucial issue to address, I will review literature focusing on Obama's progress since he entered into office in 2009, with the goal of assessing to what extent his policy could be deemed a success. This will help me to develop my own hypotheses to the question. I will go on to explain the ways in which I propose to test these hypotheses, specifically explaining what kind of research I would wish to conduct. Finally, an annotated bibliography will provide a summary of the literature referenced throughout the paper.

### **Literature Review.**

Existing literature has been largely critical of Barack Obama's Policy on the Israel / Palestine conflict. As this is an on going, unresolved issue, there are few books that relate directly to my question; most are only useful when gaining an understanding of the history of the conflict. Although it is not possible to measure the ultimate success, as there is no peace in Palestine yet, it is possible to analyse what progress has been made towards achieving peace. His attempt to bring peace and security to Israel and the Palestinians has been well documented in academic journals and in the press, largely as a failure but in a few cases as a success.

According to Jones (2010:31), Obama's "lack of success has been more noteworthy than his success." Jones (2010:30) believes Obama has been successful in "resetting foreign attitudes towards the USA", but that as a result the expectations for the future were set too high, and has made subsequent events look more like a failure. Jones (2010:32) acknowledges that the "inability to resolve generation-long problems in 18 months isn't necessarily a failure", but suggests that the situation has actually deteriorated since Obama came to office.

Obama has failed to persuade Hamas to engage in peace talks; they have been uninterested and hostile to his diplomatic efforts so far (Middle East Monitor, 2009:6). Despite the recent discussions between Israel and the Palestinians in Washington raising hopes for success, the absence of Hamas means they might be "doomed to failure" (Jones, 2010:32). Jones (2010:32) believes that "neither Palestinian nor Israeli leadership has the political strength for hard compromises necessary for agreement."

In an interview in the Harvard International Review, Chomsky (2010:56-60) sees Obama's policy as a failure as it has not significantly changed since Bush. Despite promises of a "new beginning" in Cairo, Obama's policies "so closely resembles those of his deeply flawed and unpopular predecessor" (Parmar. 2010:16). This can be seen in Obama's failure to penalise Israel over the settlements despite declaring in Cairo, "these settlements must stop" (White House, 2009). This has resulted in the Palestinians losing faith in Obama, or in any "American protestations of even-handedness" (Economist, 2010:17).

On the other hand, the “talks-breakdown-violence pattern” (Ross, 2010:3) that had re-occurred during the first decade of the twenty-first century has come to an end, and there have been reports declaring the fact that peace talks have taken place to be significant progress, especially considering the history of the conflict. The Economist published an article on the peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authorities that took place on September 2, 2010. Despite deadly attacks by Hamas occurring in the midst of direct negotiations, both parties continued discussions. “They both explicitly characterized the attack as an attempt to sabotage the talks, and insisted they wouldn’t be sidetracked” (Economist, 2010). This marked a change in attitude of the leaders, and indicated a turning point in their relations, and a willingness to co-operate.

Zucherman and B. Mortimer (2009: 78-80) praise Obama for having made the two-state solution acceptable to both sides as the best way to progress. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2010, Obama spoke to the UN General Assembly, claiming that by this time next year Palestine will be a member of the UN, and a state in its own right (White House, 2010). If this occurs, this would be the first step towards insuring peace and security, and might mean an increase on reports on his policy as a success.

### **Hypotheses.**

Analysis of the existing literature written on Barack Obama’s foreign policy on the Israel / Palestine conflict has lead to two hypotheses.

1) Obama’s policy has made significant progress; peace talks have successfully taken place and relations between all parties have improved.

Obama has successfully engaged leaders in peace talks, and as a result relations between all parties have improved. The fact alone that peace talks have gone ahead can be viewed as major progress considering the history a stalemate of 18 months prior to this September. We have reached a situation where both the Israelis and the Palestinians agree that a two-state outcome is the best solution, and view Obama's help as useful. Additionally, Hamas, who have been largely uncooperative and have attempted to disrupt previous peace talks, may have altered their stance and be willing to engage in talks in the future. All parties concerned have a better understanding of where each stands than before. I would seek to disprove that peace talks have been "little more than a charade" (Walt, 2010), and that fundamentally they have achieved significant progress towards establishing a good relationship between leaders.

If there has been a genuine change in the attitudes of the leaders, to the point where they are happy to consider working together and living peacefully side-by-side, then this could be seen as a significant step forwards, and as a success of Obama's foreign policy. Any improvement to the attitudes of Hamas would also be significant, as their absence in talks has made progress difficult without the final party present.

2) Obama's policy has failed to bring peace and security to the region. The situation has worsened; the violence and resentment between the Israelis and the Palestinians is only increasing.

Obama's efforts to bring peace and stability have not had the desired affect. He has increased resentment between parties, and this had lead to an increase in violence and

attacks. Obama's actions have been detrimental to relations between the US and the Palestinians, who have become increasingly angry and frustrated over the Israeli settlements, and Obama's failure to impose any implications on the Israelis for their actions.

### **Methodology.**

This project will attempt to answer these hypotheses by proposing interviews with the leaders or their representatives, by comparing information given in these interviews with official press releases, and by analysing statistical data gathered from a range of sources.

#### Elite Interviews

Ideally, I would like to be able to conduct interviews with the Prime Minister of Israel (Binyamin Netanyahu), the Prime Minister of the Palestinian National Authority (Mahmoud Abbas) and the leader of Hamas (Khaled Meshal). Additionally, interviewing Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and Middle East Special Envoy George Mitchell would greatly benefit my research.

The drawbacks of this approach would be the inherent bias and vested interests pertaining to each party. For example, we can assume that the US will be likely to promote a healthy image of the efforts towards peace in the region. Additionally, we should consider the influence that Israel has within the US. As a westerner, it would

be unlikely that I would be able to arrange direct access to Hamas. Such an interview could be perhaps carried out on my behalf by a third party.

With this in mind, I would propose to ask a number of critical questions focused on evaluating what progress had been made, adopting a qualitative interviewing strategy and a neutral stance.

However, it unlikely that I would be able to secure interviews with these people. Therefore, I would attempt to approach state department officials, officials from the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs and officials from the Palestinian Authority. I would gather press releases from official government websites, and analyse speeches given by the parties.

If I were able to secure any of the aforementioned interviews, I would compare them to previous interviews, in an attempt to discover a shift in attitudes. I would also compare the answers with statements and press releases given immediately following the peace talks. Any differences in their responses could prompt further analysis and investigation.

### Statistical comparison

Secondly, I would review statistical information on violent crime, opinions on the peace talks, and attitudes towards US Foreign Policy from the Israelis and the Palestinians. I would like to investigate the effect, if any, on the levels of violence

since the start of Obama's presidency. A meta-analysis might be useful if sufficient sources exist.

I would also like to investigate possible shifts in attitudes of both the Israeli and the Palestinian populations by means of analysing opinion polls and surveys.

I can gather information from sources such as the Pew Global Attitudes Project, World Values Survey, The Applied Research Institute - Jerusalem, Amnesty International, The UN, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), The World Bank and Israel Central Bureau of Statistics.

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### Annotated bibliography.

- Chomsky, N., (Spring 2010) "A President's Report Card". Interviewed by Harvard International Review, p56-60 – Noam Chomsky, critic of US Foreign Policy, expresses a largely negative view on Obama's approach to the Middle East conflict. Sees a similarity in Obama and Bush's stance, and implicates that the US have acted in an underhand way towards the Israel / Palestine conflict.
- (26/9/2009) "No time for Barack Obama to give up." Economist, 392: 8650 p16-18 – The author offers his opinions on the conflict and on Obama's actions. He is willing Obama to take action against the Israelis over their expansion of housing projects in the West Bank.
- (02/09/10) "The Extremists lose control". Economist (online), available at: [http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2010/09/palestine-israel\\_talks](http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2010/09/palestine-israel_talks) (accessed 2 November 2010) - The Author expresses his surprise over Peace Talks successfully taking place between Netanyahu and Abbas despite deadly attacks by Hamas taking place. He also comments that the reaction from both parties is encouraging.
- Guardia, A., (2007) "Holy Land, Unholy War: Israelis and Palestinians" (New Edition). Penguin Publishing: London – This critically acclaimed book gives a thorough background on the conflict, drawing out the facts from fiction. It combines detailed analysis with thoughtful and balanced conclusions.

- Jones, D.T., (10/2010) “Obama at the Two-Year Mark: No “Morning In America”. *IRPP, Policy Options*, p30-32 – Jones provides an analysis of Obama’s Foreign Policy since he came to office. Although presenting a balanced view of events, he is largely critical of Obama’s actions in the Middle East.
- Middle East Monitor, (07/07/2009) “US Talks Reveal Foreign Policy Divergence”. *Business Monitor International*, 19: 7 p6 – The Author suggests that Hamas are still hostile to Obama despite his diplomatic efforts, and discusses how the Balance of Power battle between the US and Israel is delicate and could go either way.
- Mearsheimer, J.J., Walt, S.M., (2008) “The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy.” Penguin Books – This controversial book has exposed America’s relationship with the Israel Lobby, and emphasised its influence over US Foreign Policy. They are critical of the effect that it has had, both on the US and Israel.
- Parmar, I., (04/2010) “Plus Ca Change? American Foreign Policy under Obama”. *Political Insight*, 1: 1 p14-16 – Parmar compares Foreign Policy under Obama and Bush, claiming that there are not so many differences.
- Rosen, S. J., (18/08/2010) “Bush’s Gift to Obama”. *Foreign Policy (online)*, available at:  
[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/08/18/bush\\_s\\_gift\\_to\\_obama?page=0,0](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/08/18/bush_s_gift_to_obama?page=0,0)  
(Accessed 19/11/2010) – Rosen argues that although Obama has managed to get the two parties to agree to peace talks, nothing will come of it. A more creative approach is required – The Middle East Roadmap that Bush had introduced.

- Ross, S., (08/2010) “Understand the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict”. Teach Yourself: London – This provides a basic history of the conflict, clarifying the major points in with what appears to be an unbiased account of events.
- Walt, S.M., (20/09/2010) “Settling for Failure in the Middle-East”. The Washington Post (online), available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/18/AR2009091801146.html> (Accessed 05/11/2010) - A negative and critical account of Obama’s Foreign Policy in Israel from Walt highlights the problems that Obama faces.
- White, B., (2009) “Israel – Apartheid”. Pluto Press: London – Leaning strongly against Israel, White seeks to uncover what the mainstream media in the West conceals from the public. It accuses Israel of demographic racism and ethnic cleansing.
- The White House, (2009) *The President’s Speech in Cairo, “A New Beginning”*. (Press release), 4 June 2009, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09> - The President’s speech in Egypt gives an overview of the conflict, shows sympathy for both sides, and proposes what must be done to bring peace and stability to the region.
- The White House (2010), *The President to the UN General Assembly: “We Can Say That This Time Will Be Different”*. (Press release), 23 September 2010,

available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/09/23/president-un-general-assembly-we-can-say-time-will-be-different> - Obama announces that this time next year an agreement of a two-state solution will have been reached between all parties.

- The White House (2010), *Foreign Policy*. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/foreign-policy> - Details of Obama's Foreign Policy.

His commitment to bringing peace and stability to the region.

- Zucherman, Mortimer B., (11/2009) "Hints of Palestinian Progress". *U.S. News & World Report*, 146: 10 p78-80 – It is suggested here that Obama must be flexible in order to make progress with Israel and criticises him for requesting that the Israelis stop all settlement activity. They highlight the problem that Hamas poses in the efforts to install peace.