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## **George W. Bush, Barack Obama and the Arab-Israeli Conflict**

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## **CONCLUSIONS**

**I**t has been almost two years since President Barack Obama took office. During this period, there have been numerous media comparisons between the policies of the Obama Administration and that of its predecessor, the George W. Bush Administration, particularly in the Middle East where the policies of the two Administrations have diverged the most sharply, especially in regard to the Arab-Israeli Conflict. This essay will compare the two Administrations and seek to draw a number of conclusions as to where the policies of the two Administrations were similar and where they have differed.

## I George W. Bush and Israel

**T**he policy of the Bush Administration toward Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict moved through six distinct stages. First, from the inauguration until 9/11, Bush was generally supportive of Israel while distancing his Administration from the Arab-Israeli conflict. Second, from 9/11 to June 2002, the Bush Administration actively sought to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in order to build Muslim support for his war against the Taliban in Afghanistan and the coming war against Iraq. The third stage, from June 2002 to Arafat's death in November 2004, witnessed periodic attempts by the United States to facilitate an Israeli-Palestinian settlement; the Road Map of April 2003 was the best example. A policy was also developed that called for democratization of the Arab world as a means of preventing terrorism. The fourth period, from the death of Arafat in November 2004 to the Hamas election victory of January 2006, witnessed an attempt to politically boost Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas, while also coordinating with the Palestinians, Israel's plan for a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. The fifth stage, from, January 2006 to June 2007, was a period marked by increasing difficulties for the United States in Iraq, which drew the Administration's attention away from the Arab-Israeli conflict. At the same time the United States encountered problems with its democratization programme in the Arab world, which had foundered. To make matters worse, during this period, the United States found itself confronted with increasing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians and, in the summer of 2006, a war between Israel and Hezbollah. The last stage, from July 2007 to January 2009 witnessed a final, albeit unsuccessful, effort by the Bush Administration to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreement, highlighted by the November 2007 Annapolis Conference.

## II. From the Inauguration to 9/11

**W**hen the George W. Bush Administration took office in 2001, it had a number of reasons not to continue Bill Clinton’s activist policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. First, Bush had witnessed the major effort Clinton had made and the relatively meagre results he had achieved. Bush, who sought to clearly distinguish himself from Clinton, chose not to follow Clinton’s path. Second, even if he had wanted to, Bush was unwilling to risk his very limited political capital (he had won a very narrow—and questionable—victory in a hotly disputed election) and he wanted to save his political capital for more promising policy initiatives, such as his tax cuts and the anti-ballistic missile (ABM) programme. As a result, the Administration distanced itself from the Arab-Israeli conflict, a distancing shown most clearly when Dennis Ross, who had been the special US mediator for the Arab-Israeli conflict, resigned in January 2001 and was not replaced.

Distancing itself from the Arab-Israeli conflict—and the ongoing Al-Aqsa intifada—however, did not mean that the Administration had distanced itself from Israel. On the contrary—and much to the discomfiture of Arafat and other Arab leaders—Bush quickly developed a close and warm relationship with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who was invited to visit the White House in mid-March 2001.

On the eve of the visit, the new American Secretary of State, Colin Powell, gave a major speech supportive of Israel to the pro-Israel lobbying organization, America-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). In the speech he echoed Israel’s position that the starting point for peace talks had to be the end of violence. In a clear swipe at Arafat, Powell publicly stated that “leaders have the responsibility to denounce violence, strip it of legitimacy (and) stop it.” Powell also asserted the Bush Administration’s position that the United States would assist in but not impose a peace agreement: “the US stands ready to assist, not insist. Peace arrived at voluntarily by the partners themselves is likely to prove

more robust...than a peace widely viewed as developed by others, or worse yet, imposed.”<sup>1</sup>

In a meeting several days later, Bush again reassured Sharon that the United States would facilitate, not force, the peace process. Bush also sought to enlist Sharon in his campaign to develop a national missile defence system, something the Israeli leader, whose country was a prime target of such “rogue” states as Iran and Iraq, was only too happy to agree to. Sharon, for his part, pressed Bush not to invite Arafat to the White House unless Arafat publicly called for an end to the violence, a request endorsed by nearly 300 members of Congress (87 Senators and 209 House members), who also called on Bush to close the Washington office of the PLO and to cut US aid to the PA if the violence did not cease.<sup>2</sup>

The one bit of American activism on the peace process during this period came following the publication of the Mitchell Report in mid-May. The report contained a series of recommendations for ending the rapidly escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict, first and foremost “a 100 percent effort to stop the violence.”<sup>3</sup> While Israel accepted the recommendation, with Sharon ordering a cease-fire, a series of Palestinian terrorist attacks that Arafat either could not or would not stop undermined the cease-fire. Visits by the new Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Nicholas Burns, CIA chief George Tenet<sup>4</sup> and Powell himself failed to resuscitate the cease-fire. Indeed, the escalating violence was now punctuated by Palestinian suicide bombings against Israeli civilian targets such as pizza parlours and discotheques, attacks that were strongly denounced by the United States. It is quite possible that the Bush Administration, having witnessed the failure of its one major activist effort to resuscitate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, concluded that its original hands-off policy toward the conflict was the correct one and until 9/11, it distanced itself from the conflict. All of this, of course, was to change after 9/11.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Roula Khalaf, “Powell Sets Out Bush Line on Middle East,” *The Financial Times*, 20 March 2001

<sup>2</sup> Alan Sipress, “Lawmakers criticize Palestinians,” *The Washington Post*, 6 April 2001.

<sup>3</sup> For the text of the Mitchell Report, see *Ha'aretz*, 6 May 2001. English edition online.

<sup>4</sup> For Tenet’s effort to help work out an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, see his memoirs, George Tenet, *At the Heart of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: Harper Collins 2007), chapters 4, 5, and 6.

### III. From 9/11 to June 2002

Immediately after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the United States changed its hands-off policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and sought to build a coalition, including Muslim states, against Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda terrorist organization. In an effort to gain Arab support, the United States announced its support of a Palestinian state and exercised a considerable amount of pressure on Sharon to agree to a meeting between Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Arafat to establish yet another cease-fire, even though Palestinian violence had not stopped as Sharon had demanded as the price for talks. Frustrated by this US policy, Sharon called it the equivalent of British and French policy at the 1938 Munich Conference, where Czechoslovakia had been sold out to the Nazis. His comments drew a retort from the White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer, who called them “unacceptable.”<sup>5</sup>

This, however, was to be the low point in the US-Israeli relationship under Bush. Following its rapid military gains in Afghanistan, the United States embarked on a twofold strategy. The first part, trying to reinvigorate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, was warmly greeted by US European allies and by pro-US governments in the Arab world. The second part of the strategy, threatening to carry the war from Afghanistan to other supporters of terror, especially Iraq, met with far less support.

The US effort to invigorate the Israeli-Palestine peace process began with a speech by President Bush at the United Nations in November 2001, where he said, “We are working for the day when two states – Israel and Palestine – live peacefully together within secure and recognized boundaries.” However, in a clear warning to Arafat to crack down on terrorists, he also added, “Peace will come when all have sworn off forever incitement, violence and terror. There is no such thing as a good terrorist.”<sup>6</sup> Bush also pointedly did not meet Arafat at the United Nations as

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Aluf Benn, “Sharon Calls Powell after White House Blasts PM Comments,” *Ha’aretz*, 5 October 2001. (in English).

National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice noted, “You cannot help us with al-Qaeda and hug Hezbollah or Hamas. And so the President makes that clear to Mr. Arafat.”<sup>7</sup> The United States backed up Rice’s words by adding Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah to its post-September 11 terrorist list.

The next step in the US peace effort came on 19 November with a major speech by Secretary of State Collin Powell on the US view of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>8</sup> In his speech Powell strongly condemned Palestinian terrorism, noting that the al-Aqsa Intifada was now mired in “self-defeating violence.” He also stated that although the United States believed that there should be a two-state solution to the conflict—with two states, Palestine and Israel, living side by side within secure and recognized borders—“the Palestinians must make a 100 percent effort to stop terrorism and that this effort required actions, not words: Terrorists must be arrested.” Powell emphasized that “no wrong can ever justify the murder of the innocent,” that terror and violence must stop now and that the Palestinians must realize their goals through negotiations, not violence. He further asserted—possibly in response to Arafat’s call for the return to Israel of more than three million Palestinian refugees, a development that would have upset Israel’s demographic balance—that the Palestinians must accept the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state.

While emphasizing that the United States and Israel were closely “bound together by democratic tradition” and that the United States had an “enduring and iron-clad commitment to Israeli security,” Powell indicated that Israel, too, had to make concessions for peace to be possible. These included a stop to settlement expansion and an end to the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which “causes humiliation and the killing of innocents.” In conclusion, Powell stated that the United States would do everything it could to facilitate the peace process, “but at the end of the day the peoples have to make peace”—a position

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<sup>6</sup> For the text of Bush’s speech, see *The New York Times*, 12 November 2001. See also Serge Schmemmann, “Arafat Thankful for Bush Remark about ‘Palestine,’” *The New York Times*, 12 November 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Bill Sammon, “Bush Will Not Meet with Arafat,” *The Washington Times*, 9 November 2001

<sup>8</sup> For the text of Powell’s speech, see “United States Position on Terrorists and Peace in the Middle East”, 19 November 2001, [www.state.gov/Secretary/rm/2001/6219.htm](http://www.state.gov/Secretary/rm/2001/6219.htm).



very similar to the one Powell had held when he joined the cabinet nearly a year earlier.

In order to implement the US vision of peace outlined by Powell, in addition to promises of economic aid, Assistant Secretary of State William Burns and former Marine general Anthony Zinni were dispatched to meet with Israeli and Palestinian delegations to reach a cease-fire that would lay the basis for the resumption of peace negotiations. In an effort to facilitate the Zinni mission, President Bush put his personal prestige on the line by writing to five important Arab leaders—King Abdullah II of Jordan, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, King Mohammed VI of Morocco, Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah (who had publicly praised Powell’s speech) and President Ben-Ali of Tunisia—asking for their help in persuading “the Palestinian leadership to take action to end violence and get the peace process back on track.”<sup>9</sup>

On 27 November, soon after Zinni’s arrival in the Middle East, two Palestinian terrorists, one of whom was a member of Arafat’s Fatah organization (the other was from Islamic Jihad), killed three Israelis and wounded thirty others in Afulah, a town in northern Israel. Zinni responded to the violence in a balanced way, stating, “This is why we need a cease-fire. Both sides have suffered too much.”<sup>10</sup> Zinni then met with Arafat, asking him to end the violence, but even as they were meeting, Palestinian gunmen fired at the Israeli Jerusalem neighbourhood of Gilo from the neighbouring Palestinian suburb of Beit Jala—despite an explicit October promise by Palestinian leaders not to do so.<sup>11</sup> The next day three more Israelis were killed as a suicide bomber exploded a bomb on a public bus near the Israeli city of Hadera.<sup>12</sup> This time Zinni’s response was much stronger: “The groups that do this are clearly trying to make my mission fail. There’s no justification, no

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<sup>9</sup> Janine Zacharia, “Bush Asking Arab Nations to Pitch in for a Secure Peace,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 25 November 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in *The New York Times*, 28 November 2001.

<sup>11</sup> James Bennet, “U.S. Envoy Meets Arafat and Asks for End of Violence,” *The New York Times*, 29 November 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Avi Machlis, “Israeli Bus Blast Casts Shadow on Peace Process,” *The Financial Times*, 30 November 2001.

rationale, no sets of conditions that will ever make terrorist acts a right way to respond.”<sup>13</sup> Zinni’s words, however, did not stem the tide of terrorism. Two days later suicide bombers killed ten Israeli teenagers who had gathered at the Ben Yehudah pedestrian mall in Jerusalem. This time Arafat condemned the attacks, stressing not the loss of life by Israel but the negative political effect the suicide bombers were having on the Palestinian world image.<sup>14</sup>

By now, Zinni was furious, as he saw his mission literally going up in flames: “Those responsible for planning and carrying out these attacks must be found and brought to justice. This is an urgent task and there can be no delay or excuses for not acting decisively. The deepest evil one can imagine is to attack young people and children.”<sup>15</sup> President Bush, whose prestige had been put on the line by the Zinni mission, also responded strongly: “Now more than ever Chairman Arafat and the Palestinian Authority must demonstrate through their actions and not merely their words, their commitment to fight terror.”<sup>16</sup>

Arafat seemed to get the message, if rather belatedly, from US political pressure and from Israeli military retaliation. On 16 December he called for an immediate cease-fire, condemning both suicide attacks and the launching of mortar attacks.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, the Palestinian leader did not root out the Hamas and Islamic Jihad organizations from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank; rather, he negotiated a tenuous truce with them (a tactic later repeated by Mahmoud Abbas in March 2005), something that was clearly unsatisfactory to the Israeli government. Arafat was kept penned up in Ramallah by Israeli tanks and in a further blow to his prestige, he was prohibited from leaving his compound to attend Christmas services in Bethlehem.

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<sup>13</sup> Joel Greenberg, “Envoy to Middle East Assails Palestinian Militants,” *The New York Times*, 1 December 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Lee Hockstadter, “Bomber in Bus Kills 15 in Israel,” *The Washington Post*, 3 December 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Peter Herman, “Terrorists Kill at Least 15 in Israel,” *Baltimore Sun*, 2 December 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Clyde Haberman, “Arafat Demands Halt in Attacks against Israelis,” *The New York Times*, 7 December 2001.

Three weeks after Arafat's call for a cease-fire, Israeli forces captured a ship in the Red Sea, the *Karine A*, which held fifty tons of concealed weapons, including C-4 explosives and Katyusha rockets—clearly weapons of terrorism. Arafat's initial denial that the Palestinian Authority had anything to do with the vessel further undermined his credibility, both in Israel and in the United States.<sup>18</sup> In response to heavy pressure by the United States, Arafat eventually arrested several of the Palestinian officials involved, including a major general in his own security forces and an officer in the Palestinian Authority's naval police.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, Hamas broke the truce by attacking an Israeli military outpost in the Gaza Strip, killing four soldiers and claiming the attack was in retaliation for Israel's seizure of the *Karine A*.<sup>20</sup> Israel retaliated, destroying, among other things, the runway of the Palestinian airport in the Gaza Strip and after a terrorist attack against an Israeli *bar mitzvah* party in Hadera, in which six Israelis were killed and thirty wounded, Israel blew up the main Palestinian radio transmitter.<sup>21</sup>

Thus ended the first year of the Bush Administration's efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Despite two major US efforts, one in June and another in November-December 2001, Palestinian terrorism, which Arafat was unable or, more likely, unwilling to control (he had long used terrorism as a political weapon), had sabotaged US efforts to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Nonetheless, both Arab states and the European Union (EU) continued to urge the United States to get more engaged in the search for an Arab-Israeli peace. In response, in a remarkably frank interview with *The New York Times* on 28 February 2002, Colin Powell stated, "We have not put it (the search for an Arab-

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of this point, see David Frum, *The Right Man: the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 256. Frum was a speechwriter for Bush from January 2001 to February 2002. See also Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), p. 297. In his memoirs, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown, 2010 p. 401) Bush also indicates his anger with Arafat.

<sup>19</sup> Lee Hockstadter, "Arafat Arrests Three in Arms Incident," *The Washington Post*, 12 January 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Curtius, " Hamas Takes Responsibility for Attack," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 January 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Amos Harel, "IDF Plans to Hit More PA Targets, Voice of Palestine Radio Torched in Ramallah, Police Bombed in Tulkarm," *Ha'aretz*, 20 January 2002.

Israeli peace agreement) on the back burner. What that (US engagement) usually means is ‘Go and force the Israelis to do something.’ That’s what many people think when they say ‘Get more engaged’ or ‘You’re standing on the sidelines. You haven’t made Israel blink in the face of violence.’”<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, President Bush had sent his Vice-President, Dick Cheney, who often took a much harder line than Powell, to the Arab world in an effort to build Arab support for a planned US attack on Iraq. Cheney was met with strong Arab calls for the United States to work out a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before engaging in a war with Iraq. This position apparently convinced President Bush to send Zinni back for another try at achieving a cease-fire. To facilitate the Zinni visit, Sharon made a major concession by lifting his demand for the passage of seven days without violence before talks could resume. The atmosphere of the Zinni visit was further improved by the announcement of an Arab-Israeli peace plan suggested by Saudi Arabia. This plan would be introduced at the Arab summit scheduled for the end of March in Beirut and involved Arab recognition of Israel in return for Israel’s return to its 1967 boundaries and a fair solution to the Palestinian refugee problem. To help reinforce the momentum for peace, the United States pushed for a new UN Security Council resolution, Resolution 1397, on 13 March 2002, which called for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the end of violence, incitement and terrorism; and the resumption of negotiations based on the Tenet and Mitchell plans.<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, the diplomatic momentum for peace was shattered by another series of Palestinian terrorist attacks just as Zinni was seeking to consolidate a cease-fire and the Arab summit was taking place in Beirut. On 27 March the first night of the Jewish holiday of Passover, 29 Jews were murdered and more than one hundred wounded at a Passover Seder in the coastal resort town of Netanya. This attack was followed by suicide bombings in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa over the next three days, bombings that resulted in the deaths of an additional 17

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<sup>22</sup> Todd S. Purdum, “Powell Says U.S. Will Grab Chances at Middle East Peace,” *The New York Times*, 28 February 2002.

<sup>23</sup> The text of UN Security Council Resolution 1397 adopted on 12 March 2002 can be found at:  
<http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N02/283/59/PDF/N0228359.pdf?OpenElement>

people and the wounding of 84. These events precipitated an Israeli attack on Arafat's compound in Ramallah, followed by a sweep into the major Palestinian cities of the West Bank, in what Sharon called Operation Defensive Shield.

As these events were unfolding, the United State at first strongly backed Israel, with Powell noting, "Sharon made concessions, while Arafat backed terrorism."<sup>24</sup> Then, when mass demonstrations broke out in the Arab world, which may have worried Bush as he stepped up his preparations for an attack on Iraq, the President decided to once again involve the United States. In a major speech on 4 April 2002, after first denouncing terrorism and pointedly noting that "the chairman of the Palestinian Authority has not consistently opposed or confronted terrorists nor has he renounced terror as he agreed to do at Oslo," Bush called for the Israelis to withdraw from the West Bank cities they were occupying.<sup>25</sup> Bush also announced that he was sending Powell to the Middle East to work out a cease-fire. Several days later, the President urged the Israelis to withdraw "without delay,"<sup>26</sup> but then he ran into a firestorm of domestic criticism for pressuring Israel. First, the neo-conservatives, who were the intellectual lifeblood of the Administration, attacked Bush for urging Sharon to withdraw, claiming the Israeli leader was fighting terrorism just as the United States was fighting terrorism after 9/11. Then, the Evangelical Christians, a large and energetic base of Bush's core constituency, also attacked Bush for pressuring Israel.<sup>27</sup> Third, on 15 April a quarter of a million people rallied for Israel on the Mall in Washington, a demonstration organized by

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<sup>24</sup> For Powell's comments, see "Excerpts from Powell's News Conference of 29 March 2002," *The New York Times*, 30 March 2002. See also Tracy Wilkinson, "Israel Corners a Defiant Arafat," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 March 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Woodward, *Bush at War*, p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Israel has been carefully cultivating the support of Evangelical Christians. The Israeli ambassador to the United States, Daniel Ayalon, regularly visited Evangelical churches to thank them for their support, which he has called "so important in this day and age"; cited in James Morrison, "Israel Gives Thanks," *The Washington Times*, (Embassy Row Section), 27 November 2003). See also James Morrison, "Praying for Israel," *The Washington Times*, (Embassy Row Section 28 October 2003), citing Ayalon speaking in an Evangelical church in Tampa, Florida, where he stated, "The American Christian community is a bedrock of support for the State of Israel and its people."

the US Jewish community; the demonstration also included Evangelical Christians among its speakers. The message of the rally was that the United States should support Israel's fight against Palestinian terrorism, which was similar to the anti-terrorist policy of the United States after 9/11. Finally, the Administration was severely criticized by influential members of Congress, including Republican House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, a strong friend of Israel.<sup>28</sup>

Another factor prompting Bush to change his position was Arafat's continued sponsorship of terrorism. When Arafat's wife came out in support of suicide bombings as a legitimate form of resistance against Israeli occupation and the Israelis gave the United States documents showing that Arafat had not only tolerated terrorism but had helped finance it, Bush further turned against the Palestinian leader. On 26 May, while on a state visit to Russia, Bush noted that Arafat "hasn't delivered. He had a chance to secure the peace as a result of the hard work of President Clinton and he didn't. He had a chance to fight terrorism and he hadn't."<sup>29</sup>

As Palestinian terrorist attacks continued to proliferate, Sharon, who had pulled Israeli forces out of the cities of the West Bank in May 2002, sent them back in June, this time with minimal criticism from the United States. Indeed, in a major speech on 24 June, Bush called for a "new and different Palestinian leadership" so that a Palestinian state could be born. In the most anti-Arafat speech in his presidency, Bush stated:

I call on the Palestinian people to elect new leaders, leaders not compromised by terror. I call upon them to build a practicing democracy, based on tolerance and liberty. If the Palestinian people actively pursue these goals, America and the world will actively support their efforts. If the Palestinian people meet these goals, they will be able to reach agreement with Israel and Egypt and Jordan on security and other arrangements for independence. And when the

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<sup>28</sup> Howard Kohr, executive director of AIPAC, called DeLay, the former House Majority Leader, "one of the more important, resolute, and outspoken supporters of Israel"; cited in Juliet Eilperin, "Mideast rises on DeLay's Agenda," *The Washington Post*, 16 October 2003.

<sup>29</sup> Cited in "Bush Slams Arafat but Sees 'New Attitude' in Some PA Leaders," *Ha'aretz*, 26 May 2002.

Palestinian people have new leaders, new institutions and new security arrangements with their neighbours, the United States of America will support the creating of a Palestinian state whose borders and certain aspects of its sovereignty will be provisional until resolved as part of a final settlement in the Middle East.

Today, Palestinian authorities are encouraging, not opposing, terrorism. This is unacceptable and the United States will not support the establishment of a Palestinian state until its leaders engage in a sustained fight against the terrorists and dismantle their infrastructure. This will require an externally supervised effort to rebuild and reform the Palestinian security services. The security system must have clear lines of authority and accountability and a unified chain of command.<sup>30</sup>

President Bush then called on Israel to respond to a new Palestinian leadership when it was formed:

As new Palestinian institutions and new leaders emerge, demonstrating real performance on reform, I expect Israel to respond and work toward a final status agreement. With intensive security and effort by all, this agreement could be reached within three years from now. And I and my country will actively lead toward that goal...As we make progress toward security, Israeli forces need to withdraw fully to positions they held prior to 28 September 2000. And consistent with the recommendations of the Mitchell Committee, Israeli settlement activity in the occupied territories must stop.<sup>31</sup>

While Bush chided the Israelis somewhat on settlement activity, the brunt of the President's ire was clearly on Arafat and with this speech Bush formally joined Sharon in ruling out Arafat as a partner in the peace process.

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<sup>30</sup> For the text of the Bush speech, see <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020624-3.html> .

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

## IV. From June 2002 to Arafat's Death in November 2004

Following the 24 June speech, US foreign policy in the Middle East had two main objectives. The first was to work with the European Union, Russia and the United Nations as part of a "Diplomatic Quartet" to fashion a road map leading to a Palestinian-Israeli peace settlement. The second was to build a large coalition to prepare for war with Iraq.

In designing the Road Map with the EU, Russia and the UN, the Bush Administration faced a major problem. Although the United States had written off Arafat as a suitable partner for peace, as had Israel, the other three members of the Diplomatic Quartet had not and this discrepancy caused problems in subsequent diplomacy. In addition, the presentation of the Road Map, which the Quartet began planning in July 2002, was delayed on numerous occasions and was not made public until the completion of the major combat phase of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq at the end of March 2003. As a result, many cynical and not so cynical, Middle East observers felt that the Road Map was aimed at merely assuaging the Arabs while the Bush Administration was preparing to attack Iraq.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, in the run-up to the war in September 2002, when the Israelis laid siege to Arafat's compound in Ramallah following another series of brutal suicide bombings, the United States chose to abstain on, rather than veto, a UN Security Council resolution<sup>33</sup> condemning the Israeli action, with Condoleezza Rice reportedly telling the Israeli government that the United States expected a speedy

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<sup>32</sup> The scepticism was reinforced in December 2002 when neoconservative Elliot Abrams was made Condoleezza Rice's deputy for Arab-Israeli affairs on the National Security Council. For a view of the evolving thinking of Abrams and his relationship with other neoconservatives, see Connie Bruck, "Back Roads: How Serious is the Bush Administration about Creating a Palestinian State?" *New Yorker* 15 December 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Text of the Resolution 1435 adopted on 24 September 2002 can be found at: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N02/601/58/PDF/N0260158.pdf?OpenElement>



resolution of the siege because it “doesn’t help” US efforts to galvanize support for the campaign against Iraq.<sup>34</sup>

In any case, following delays on account of the Israeli elections of January 2003 (in which Sharon’s Likud Party scored an impressive victory) and the invasion of Iraq, which began in late March, the Road Map was finally published on 30 April 2003. At the time, it appeared that Bush, spurred on by his ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, wanted to prove his critics wrong by demonstrating that he was genuinely interested in an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. According to the Road Map, which the Bush Administration announced with great fanfare,<sup>35</sup> the Palestinians, in phase one of the three-phase plan leading to a Palestinian state, had to “declare an unequivocal end to violence and terrorism and end incitement against Israel and undertake visible efforts on the ground to arrest, disrupt and restrain individuals and groups conducting and planning attacks on Israelis anywhere.” Second, the Palestinians had to appoint an “empowered” Prime Minister and establish a government based on a strong parliamentary democracy and cabinet and have only three security services, which would report to the empowered Prime Minister. By these measures, the United States had hoped to weaken, if not eliminate, Arafat’s power base and in his place create an “empowered” Prime Minister who would be a proper partner for peace. For its part, Israel, under phase one of the Road Map, had to refrain from the deportation of Palestinians, attacks on Palestinian civilians and the confiscation or demolition of Palestinian homes and property and as the “comprehensive security performance” of the Palestinians moved forward, the Israeli military had to “withdraw progressively” from areas occupied since 28 September 2000; dismantle settlement outposts erected since March 2001; and “freeze all settlement activity (including natural growth of settlements).”

With Bush at the peak of his international influence, as a result of the apparent military victory in Iraq, Arafat was compelled to accede to the Road Map’s demands to create the post of Prime Minister to which senior Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, was appointed. Yet this appointment

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<sup>34</sup> Cited in Aluf Benn, “U.S. Telling PM That the Muqata Siege Undermining Plans for Iraq,” *Ha’aretz*, 29 September 2002.

<sup>35</sup> The text of the Road Map can be found at the UN site:  
<http://www.un.org/news/dh/mideast/roadmap122002.pdf>

appeared to be a ploy; it soon became evident that Mahmoud Abbas was not the “empowered” Prime Minister the United States had in mind, since Arafat retained control over most of the Palestinian security forces. Apparently, the United States had overlooked this fact in the hope that Abbas, who, unlike Arafat, had never been demonized by either Sharon or the Israeli public, had sufficient power to be a credible negotiating partner for Israel. Although the Palestinian Authority accepted the Road Map, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade and the Tanzim (young militants tied to Arafat’s Fatah organization) did not. Israel, albeit with a number of reservations, also accepted it. When the Road Map was published, it was attacked by eighty-eight US Senators, who asserted that the Road Map’s position against Palestinian terrorism was not as strong as that in Bush’s statement of 24 June 2002.<sup>36</sup>

Initially, the Road Map was greeted with optimism, especially when on 29 June 2003, Abbas succeeded in eliciting a ninety-day *hudna*, or truce, from the leaders of Hamas, the Tanzim and Islamic Jihad, though not from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade.

Although Israeli military leaders worried that the terrorist group would use the 90-day period to rebuild their forces and armaments (especially the Qassam rockets that had been fired into Israel from the Gaza Strip), Sharon proved willing to take a chance on the *hudna*. He called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from northern Gaza and Bethlehem; the closing of some checkpoints hindering traffic between Palestinian villages and cities; the shutdown of some illegal outposts on the West Bank (although other outposts were set up); the release of some Palestinian prisoners (though far fewer than the Palestinians wanted), including an elderly terrorist who had killed 14 Israelis in 1975; and the loosening of work restrictions on Palestinians.

President Bush sought to move the peace process forward by meeting with both Abbas and Sharon in Washington in July 2003, although differences over Israel’s construction of its security wall proved to be problematic during Bush’s talks with the two leaders.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, during the *hudna*, attacks on Israel continued,

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<sup>36</sup> For the text of the letter of the 88 Senators, see *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 32, no 4 (Summer 2003), p. 185.

including the murder of Israeli civilians, although the number of attacks decreased significantly from the period preceding the *hudna*. In addition, Abbas worked to lessen anti-Israeli incitement, painting over some of the anti-Israel slogans displayed on walls in the Gaza Strip. However, the key demand of both Bush and the Israelis—that Mahmoud Abbas crack down on the terrorists—was not met, primarily because Arafat refused to allow it. Nonetheless, Abbas tried to convince the United States that he could negotiate a permanent truce with the terrorist groups. While some in the US State Department seemed to be willing to go along with Abbas, Sharon was not and as attacks on Israelis continued during the *hudna*, Sharon decided to retaliate by attacking the Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists who were seen as responsible. Then, on 19 August, less than two months into the *hudna*, a terrorist attack in Jerusalem killed 21 Israelis, including a number of children. In response, Sharon stepped up his attacks on the terrorists, which led Hamas to declare an end to the *hudna*. Soon afterward, blaming both Arafat and Israel for a lack of support, Abbas resigned and the peace process again came to a halt.

In the aftermath of Abbas's resignation, with the peace process stalled, the United States again distanced itself from the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, as the Bush Administration increasingly concentrated on the deteriorating situation in Iraq. Bush did, however, begin to push a policy of democratization for the Middle East. Influenced by Israeli politician Natan Sharansky's book *The Case for Democracy*,<sup>38</sup> Bush came to argue that there were two major reasons why the US should push to democratize the Middle East. First, if young men had a chance to participate politically in their societies by joining political parties, demonstrating in the streets for their political positions, enjoying freedom of the press and

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<sup>37</sup> Elaine Monaghan, "Bush Praises Palestinian Leader's Courage," *Times of London* 26 July 2003, Guy Dunmore, "Bush Attacks Israelis for Building of West Bank Wall," *The Financial Times*, 26 July 2003); and Brian Knowlton, "Sharon Meets with Bush but Says Security Fence Will Still Go Up," *International Herald Tribune*, 30 July 2003.

<sup>38</sup> Natan Sharansky, *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror* (New York: Public Affairs Press, 2004). See also Joel Rosenberg, "Two Great Dissidents: Natan Sharansky's Vision and President Bush's," *National Review Online* 19 November 2004. For an early critique of the democratization programme, see Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottoway, eds., *Uncharted Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2005).

playing a role in choosing their nation's leaders through fair elections, they would be less likely to become terrorists. Second, democracies were less likely to fight each other than autocratic or totalitarian states. Thus, the Administration's reasoning went, if the Middle East became more democratic it would be less likely to spawn terrorists and would be a more peaceful region of the world. Bush's democratization policy also benefited Israel. As the only genuine democracy in the region (with the partial exception of Turkey), Israel was not only an anti-terrorist ally of the United States, but a democratic one as well.

While Bush was formulating his democratization policy, Sharon was developing a new strategy of his own, the unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. This was conceived in part as an initiative to prevent other diplomatic efforts' being imposed on Israel (such as the Geneva initiative of Yossi Beilin),<sup>39</sup> and in part to preserve Israel as both a Jewish and a democratic state by ending Israeli control over the approximately 1.4 million Palestinian Arabs living in the Gaza Strip.<sup>40</sup> At the same time Sharon decided to make a major effort to speed up the building of the Israeli security fence between Israel and the West Bank to prevent Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israel. The fence, however, did not run along the old 1967 border but took in a swath of land on the West Bank.

By early 2004 the United States and Israel began detailed bargaining on the unilateral withdrawal and the security fence and under the US pressure (and that of the Israeli Supreme Court), Sharon agreed to move the security fence closer to the 1949 armistice line. According to the then Israeli ambassador to the United States Daniel Ayalon, Sharon also agreed to add four settlements in the northern part of the West Bank to his disengagement plan.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Yossi Beilin, *The Path to Geneva: The Quest for a Permanent Agreement 1996-2004* (New York: RDV Books, 2004).

<sup>40</sup> For an analysis of Sharon's disengagement strategy, see David Makovsky, *Engagement through Disengagement: Gaza and the Potential for Renewed Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2005). See also Robert O. Freedman, "Sharon: The Evolution of a Security Hawk," *Midstream*, vol. 48, nos. 6-7, May-June 2004.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Nicholas Kralev, "White House Urged West Bank Action," *The Washington Times*, 13 August 2004.

The result of the bargaining was a meeting between Sharon and Bush in Washington in mid-April 2004 that was structured not only to reinforce the Sharon disengagement initiative but also to help each leader politically. Thus Bush went a very long way toward supporting Sharon's policies. Not only did he welcome Sharon's disengagement plan as "real progress" and assert that the United States was "strongly committed" to Israel's well-being as a Jewish state within "secure and defensible borders," but he also went on to reject any Palestinian "right of return" to Israel, stating, "It seems clear that an agreed just, fair and realistic framework for a solution to the Palestinian refugee issue as part of any final status agreement will need to be found through the establishment of a Palestinian state and the settling of Palestinian refugees there, rather than in Israel."<sup>42</sup>

Bush also reinforced Israel's position that it would not fully return to the 1949 armistice lines and that any final agreement would have to reflect the settlements Israel had built since 1967, stating, "In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing population centres, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949."

Finally, Bush reaffirmed Israel's right to self-defence against terrorism, noting, "Israel will retain its right to defend itself against terrorism including taking action against terrorist organizations." This statement not only endorsed Israel's right to go back into the Gaza Strip to fight terrorism but also implicitly endorsed Israel's strategy of assassinating the leaders of Hamas, a process that continued during the spring and summer of 2004.

In his meeting with Sharon, Bush also made a number of gestures to the Palestinians. Not only did he reaffirm his commitment to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and call for Israel to freeze settlement activity and remove unauthorized outposts, but he also put limits on Israel's security wall, asserting, "As the government of Israel has stated, the barrier being erected by Israel should be a security rather than a political barrier, should be temporary and therefore not prejudice any final status issues including final borders and its route should take into account, consistent with security needs, its impact on Palestinians not engaged in terrorist activities." Nonetheless, returning to the theme he had

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<sup>42</sup> All quotations from Bush's and Sharon's speeches are taken from *Ha'aretz*, 15 April 2004.

emphasized since 9/11, Bush demanded that the Palestinians “act decisively against terror, including sustained, targeted and effective operations to stop terrorism and dismantle terrorist capabilities and infrastructure.”

It is clear that Sharon had scored a great diplomatic success with his visit and he heaped lavish praise on President Bush. After noting that the disengagement plan “can be an important contribution” to the President’s Road Map for peace, he went on to state, “You have proven, Mr. President, your ongoing, deep and sincere friendship to the State of Israel and to the Jewish people....In all these years, I have never met a leader as committed as you are, Mr. President, to the struggle for freedom and the need to confront terrorism wherever it exists.”

Needless to say, for a President now deeply engaged in an election campaign against John Kerry, a liberal Senator from Massachusetts, who normally could expect to get the vast majority of Jewish votes, Sharon’s words were extremely helpful to Bush, especially in pivotal states like Florida with its large Jewish population. Indeed, not only did Bush strongly support Sharon on the disengagement plan, but the Bush Administration also sent a 26-page booklet, titled *President George W. Bush—A Friend of the American Jewish Community*, to American Jewish organizations, stressing Bush’s commitment to the state of Israel and to the world Jewish community. Prominent themes in the booklet were Bush’s opposition to terrorism aimed at Israel and his opposition to PLO leader Yasser Arafat. The booklet stated, “For Yasser Arafat the message has been clear. While he was frequent White House guest during the last Administration, he has never been granted a meeting with President Bush.”<sup>43</sup>

In another effort to court Jewish support, Bush reportedly overrode State Department opposition to create an office at the State Department to monitor the rising tide of anti-Semitism around the world. Perhaps reflecting on the political nature of the proposed office, an unnamed State Department official told the *Washington Times*: “It’s more of a bureaucratic nuisance than a real problem. We are not going to fight a bill that has gained such political momentum.”<sup>44</sup> Finally,

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<sup>43</sup> Cited in Nathan Guttman, “President Bush Woos the Jewish Vote,” *Ha’aretz*, 12 August 2004.

<sup>44</sup> Cited in Nicholas Kralev, “Anti-Semitism Office Planned at State Department,” *The Washington Times*, 14 October 2004. See also “State Department Opposes Anti-Semitism Bill,” *The Washington Post*, 14 October 2004.

on the eve of the US presidential election, Bush sent National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice to address the AIPAC meeting in Florida. The very fact of her presence, despite an ongoing FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) probe of a Pentagon analyst who had allegedly passed secrets to AIPAC, underlined the great importance the Bush Administration placed on getting Jewish support in the election.<sup>45</sup>

Bush won the 2004 election by 3.5 million votes and soon thereafter Arafat, seen by both the United States and Israel as the main obstacle to an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, died. Arafat's death set the stage for another US attempt to revive the Arab-Israeli peace process.

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<sup>45</sup> Cited in Nathan Guttman, "Kerry and Bush Send in Top Guns to Woo AIPAC," *Ha'aretz*, 26 October 2004.

## V. From Arafat's Death to the Hamas Victory

In the aftermath of the death of Arafat and the re-election victory of George W. Bush, the situation initially appeared to improve, as far as US policy in the Middle East was concerned. First, the replacement of Colin Powell by Condoleezza Rice as US Secretary of State added a great deal of coherence to US policy, as the old rifts between the Department of State, on the one hand and the White House and the Defence Department, on the other, were minimized. In addition, as Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's influence declined because of the increased problems the United States was encountering in Iraq, Rice became the unquestioned Administration spokesperson on foreign policy, especially on the Middle East. Second, the US democratization plan for the Middle East appeared to score some major triumphs with democratic elections being successfully held in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority.

In the PA, an election was held to choose the successor to Yasser Arafat and in what international observers considered a fair and democratic election, Mahmoud Abbas, a Fatah leader who had earlier served a brief term as Palestinian Prime Minister under the Road Map, was elected with 60 percent of the votes. What made Abbas such an appealing candidate for the United States was his regular denunciation of terrorism as inimical to Palestinian interests. Thus, with the Abbas election, the two main stands of US post-9/11 Middle East policy—the fight against terrorism and support for democratization—came together and it was not long before Abbas was welcomed to the White House with full pomp and ceremony, a privilege that had been denied to Arafat, whom the Bush Administration saw as closely linked to terrorism.

Sharon, for his part, made a series of gestures to Abbas in February 2005, including the release of 700 Palestinian detainees and agreement to a cease-fire. And, in order to help Abbas strengthen his position in the PA, the United States dispatched Lieutenant General William Ward to reorganize the Palestinian armed forces and James Wolfensohn, the former head of the World Bank, to help develop the Palestinian economy; unfortunately, neither proved to be very effective. Ward was never able to transform the disparate Palestinian military groupings into an



effective fighting force and he was replaced by Major General Keith Dayton. As far as Wolfensohn was concerned, despite his heroic efforts—including the use of his personal funds to facilitate the purchase by the Palestinians of Israeli greenhouses in the Gaza Strip—the Palestinian economy remained problematic.

While US-Palestinian relations got off to a good start after the election of Abbas, the new Palestinian leader took a risky gamble in March 2005, when, in an effort to achieve harmony among the contending Palestinian forces, he signed an agreement with Hamas and several other Palestinian organization (but not Islamic Jihad) providing that, in return for a cease-fire with Israel, the only mode of interaction among the Palestinians would be “dialogue.”<sup>46</sup> This agreement ran counter to Israeli and American calls for Abbas to crack down on Hamas and the other Palestinian terrorist organizations. This issue became particularly pressing as Israel prepared for its disengagement from Palestinian territories during the summer of 2005, an action involving the pull-out of Israeli settlements and military forces from the Gaza Strip and the pullout of Israeli settlements from the northern West Bank. While Hamas had signed the cease-fire agreement, Islamic Jihad had not and there were concerns that the Iranian-supported organization might disrupt the Israeli disengagement. While this disruption never materialized, Islamic Jihad did undertake a number of terrorist attacks against Israeli in 2005 and the Israeli government responded with “targeted killings” (assassinations) of Islamic Jihad operatives.

The main problem for Israel, however, was Hamas and unless Abbas moved against the Islamic organization, it appeared unlikely that Israel would take him seriously as a peace partner. Abbas, however, appeared more interested in creating Palestinian solidarity than in satisfying Israel. Indeed, in responding to my question in late June 2005 in Ramallah about why he had chosen not to crack down on Hamas after his strong victory in the Palestinian presidential elections, Abbas replied, “What and have a Palestinian civil war!” Unfortunately for Abbas, two years later the Palestinian civil war between Fatah and Hamas did occur, at a time when Abbas was much weaker and Hamas much stronger than in June 2005.

Despite Abbas’s failure to crack down on Hamas, Secretary of State Rice sought to facilitate cooperation between Israel and the Abbas-led Palestinian Authority as the disengagement took place. Thus she helped to negotiate a number of

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<sup>46</sup> The agreement was published on the Associated Press Web site 17 March 2005.

agreements between Israel and the PA, including one to haul away debris from the destroyed Jewish settlements (the PA had demanded their destruction), another on the modus operandi of the crossing points between the Gaza Strip and Egypt and between Gaza and Israel and a third agreement on travel between Gaza and the West Bank. While the disengagement went relatively smoothly, despite the protests of Jewish settlers in the Gaza Strip, the next issue to arise was the election for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). Abbas had postponed the elections from their original July 2004 date to January 2006, in part so he could get political credit for the Israeli withdrawal and in part because he could not settle the rifts between the old and young guards of his Fatah organization.

A key issue in the elections was whether Hamas would run and, if so, under what conditions. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon initially opposed Hamas's participation in the elections, citing the Oslo Accord requirement that no "racist" party could run in the elections; since Hamas continued to call for the destruction of Israel, it was clearly "racist." Only if Hamas renounced terrorism and recognized Israel's right to exist should it be allowed to run, Sharon asserted. The United States, however, took a contrary position. In part because forbidding Hamas to participate would hurt the US democratization plan for the Middle East and in part because Abbas had promised to finally crack down on Hamas after the PLC elections, Rice exerted heavy pressure on Sharon to allow Hamas participation. The Israeli leader, perhaps preoccupied with Israeli domestic politics (he had broken away from his Likud Party and formed the new Kadima Party in November 2005, four months before the Israeli parliamentary elections), gave in to the US pressure. It was a decision that both the United States and Israel would come to regret.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> In a *The Financial Times*, interview on April 20, 2007, Rice clung to the democratization policy, stating, "I'll choose elections and democracy, even if it brings to power people that we don't like....Without reform and democratization you're going to have a false stability in the Middle East which will continue to give rise to extremism"; interview, "what the Secretary Has Been Saying," on the US State Department Website.

## VI. The Hamas Electoral Victory to the Seizure of Gaza

Capitalizing on Fatah's corruption, the PA's inability to provide law and order in the West Bank and the continued divisions between Fatah's old and young guards, Hamas swept to a massive victory in the 25 January 2006, PLC elections. Hamas representatives were quick to claim that their victory was due to their policy of "resistance" against Israel.<sup>48</sup> The Hamas victory created a major dilemma for the United States, as its two main policies in the Middle East—the war against terror and support for democratization—had now come into direct conflict with each other: utilizing democratic means Hamas, an organization designated as terrorist by the US, had taken control of the Palestinian legislature and its leader Ismail Haniyeh had become the new Palestinian Prime Minister. Meanwhile Israel faced another challenge.

By the time of the Hamas election victory, Sharon, who had suffered a massive stroke in early January 2006, was no longer Israel's Prime Minister. His replacement, as acting Prime Minister, was his Kadima colleague Ehud Olmert, who now not only had to prepare his new party for the 28 March Israeli elections but also had to deal with the Hamas election victory. Olmert quickly decided Israel would have nothing to do with Hamas unless it changed its policies toward Israel, a position embraced by most of the Israeli political spectrum. For her part, Rice quickly convened the Diplomatic Quartet (the United States, the EU, the UN and Russia), which agreed not to have any dealings with the Hamas-led Palestinian government until Hamas renounced terrorism, agreed to recognize Israel and acceded to the agreements signed between Israel and the PLO, including Oslo I, Oslo II and the Road Map.

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<sup>48</sup> Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar said Hamas would not renounce the right to armed resistance against Israel to keep the money flowing from Europe and the United States and stated, "I'm sure Israel will disappear as the Crusaders and other empires disappeared. All of Palestine will become part of the Arab and Islamic land – as the Koran promised"; cited in Paul Martin, "Leader Likely to Cut Ties with Israel," *The Washington Times*, 27 January 2006.

Russia, however, soon broke with the Quartet consensus by inviting a Hamas delegation for an official visit to Moscow. In April 2006, after the United States and the EU, seeing no change in Hamas policy, had decided to cut all aid to the PA (except “humanitarian” assistance), Russia again broke ranks with its Quartet colleagues by offering the PA economic assistance.

The newly elected Israeli government led by Olmert refused to have anything to do either with Abbas (whom they claimed was ineffectual) or with the Hamas-led Palestinian government. For its part, the new Hamas government repeated its refusal to recognize Israel or make peace with it and supported, as “legitimate resistance,” continued attacks on Israel whether in the form of Qassam rockets fired from the Gaza Strip into Israel or in the form of suicide bombings such as the one on 17 April 2005, which claimed ten Israeli lives.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, as Israel was confronting a Hamas-led government in the Palestinian territories, it also had to face a rising threat from Iran. After two years of on-and-off-again negotiations with the European Union over its secret nuclear programme, in August 2005 Iran broke off negotiations and announced it was moving ahead with nuclear enrichment. Making matters worse for Israel, which along with the United States feared that Iran was on the path to developing nuclear weapons, the newly elected Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called for Israel to be “wiped off the map” and declared that the Holocaust was a myth.<sup>50</sup> While the United States was highly supportive of Israel in the face of the Iranian leader’s provocative statements (Bush, on 1 February 2006, had stated, “Israel is a solid ally of the United States; we will rise to Israel’s defence if need be”<sup>51</sup>), the Israeli leadership had to question whether the United States, increasingly bogged down in both Iraq and Afghanistan (where the Taliban had revived), would act to eliminate the nuclear threat from Iran, or whether Israel would have to do the job itself.

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<sup>49</sup> Cited in Greg Meyer, “Suicide bombing in Israel Kills 9; Hamas Approves,” *The New York Times*, 18 April 2006.

<sup>50</sup> Iran’s policy toward Israel is discussed in Robert O. Freedman, *Russia, Iran, and the Nuclear Question: The Putin Record* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, 2006), pp. 32-36.

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Bernard Reich, “The United States and Israel: A Special Relationship,” in David W. Lesch, ed., *The Middle East and the United States*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2007), p. 221.

Meanwhile, Israel's relations with the Hamas-led Palestinian government continued to deteriorate, with stepped-up shelling of Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip and Israeli retaliation. Then, in the summer of 2006, full-scale war broke out, first with Hamas and then with Hezbollah following the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers. In looking at the US-Israeli relations during both conflicts, there are a number of similarities. The Bush Administration has seen both Hamas and Hezbollah as terrorist organizations linked to Syria and to Iran and, as such, enemies of the United States.

Consequently, when Israel was fighting both terrorist organizations, it was on the same side of the barricades as the United States and the United States adopted a strongly pro-Israeli position in both conflicts. Thus it vetoed a UN Security Council resolution condemning Israel for its bombardment of the Gaza town of Beit Hanoun, from which rockets were being launched into Israel and condemned both Iran and Syria for their aid to Hezbollah in its war against Israel. Indeed, in an "open-mike" incident at the G-8 summit in Saint Petersburg, Russia, Bush told British Prime Minister Tony Blair that the global powers had to "get Syria to get Hezbollah to stop doing this s\_\_\_ and then it's over." Bush sought, without success, to get the G-8 to condemn both Iran and Syria for their role in the violence.<sup>52</sup>

In the Second Lebanon War, however, there was one additional factor that influenced US policy. The anti-Syrian Fuad Siniora government, which had come into office in Lebanon following the departure of Syrian forces in 2005, was seen as an ally of the United States and one of the few remaining successes of its democratization programme. Consequently, the United States sought to ensure that if the Israeli-Hezbollah fighting did not enhance Siniora's position, by weakening Hezbollah, at least it would not hurt it. Thus, for the first two weeks of the war, the United States gave full diplomatic backing to Israel, hoping it would destroy Hezbollah, the Siniora government's main opposition. However, in late July, after an Israeli attack in Qana aimed at a Hezbollah bunker accidentally killed 60 Lebanese civilians<sup>53</sup> it had become clear that Israeli dependence on its air force to

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<sup>52</sup> Cited in Yochi Drazin., "Battle in Middle East Widens U.S.-Russia Rift," *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 July 2006.

deal with Hezbollah was not working,<sup>54</sup> and that Siniora's position was being threatened by the growing popularity of Hezbollah, which was successfully "standing up to Israel." This situation also negatively affected the governments of the US allies Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Consequently, the United States began to work for a ceasefire and the result was UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which called for the Lebanese army to move to the Israeli border and for the expansion of the UN troops in southern Lebanon to fifteen thousand.<sup>55</sup> Israel was less than happy with the cease-fire because it did not lead to the disarming of Hezbollah or to a cessation of Syria's transfer of weapons to Hezbollah.

In the aftermath of the Israel-Hezbollah war, US Secretary of State Rice, who had originally spoken of a "new Middle East" emerging from the conflict, sought to build on the fears of rising Iranian influence in the region following the political victory of Iran's ally, Hezbollah. She tried to construct an anti-Iranian Sunni Arab bloc of Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and to align it with Israel against Iran and its allies, Hezbollah and Hamas. Helping Rice in this project was Saudi Arabia's decision to revive the 2002 Arab peace plan, which offered the Arab recognition of Israel if it withdrew to its pre-1967 War boundaries and agreed to a "fair" settlement of the Palestinian refugee problem.

Unfortunately for Rice, the Democratic victory in the November 2006 US Congressional elections weakened the Bush Administration, which had already been damaged by the failures in its Iraq policy and in the Hurricane Katrina recovery effort. This Democratic victory gave rise to a feeling, especially in the Middle East, that Bush had become a "lame duck" President and that any serious discussion of peace should wait until his successor took office in January 2009. Nonetheless, Rice urged Olmert to negotiate with Abbas, while the United States continued to try to strengthen him militarily while clashes between Hamas and

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<sup>53</sup> Cited in Marina Grishina and Yelena Suponina, "Qana Tragedy – Russia and UN Urge Immediate Cease-Fire in Lebanon," *Vremya Novostei* 31 July 2006, for Bush's view of the war, see George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (NY: Random House, 2010), pp. 413-415.

<sup>54</sup> Elli Lieberman "Israel's 2006 war with Hezbollah: The Failure of Deterrence" in *Contemporary Israel* (ed. Robert O. Freedman) (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press 2009) pp. 317-358.

<sup>55</sup> Text of the UNSC Resolution 1701 adopted on 11 August 2006 can be found at: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N02/601/58/PDF/N0260158.pdf?OpenElement>

Abbas's Fatah increased in intensity. Saudi Arabia succeeded in temporarily stopping the fighting through an agreement in Mecca in February 2007, an agreement that established a Palestinian national unity government, but neither the United States nor Israel was pleased with the platform of the new government, which was dominated by Hamas and which took positions closer to Hamas than to Fatah.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the new Palestinian government, Rice pressed on with her efforts to resuscitate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which she saw as necessary to facilitate the alignment between the Sunni Arab states and Israel. Thus she agreed to speak with non-Hamas members of the Palestinian national unity government, something that Israel feared would "sanitize" Hamas.<sup>57</sup> Rice also announced that at some point the United States, in order to create a "political horizon," might suggest its own solutions to the conflict,<sup>58</sup> thus appearing to bring US policy back to where it had been in the Clinton Administration, with the Clinton Parameters.

As part of her strategy Rice suggested the speedy implementation of the November 2005 agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, under which Israel would permit bus travel between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (Israel had suspended implementation of the agreement following the Hamas victory in the January 2006 PLC elections), as well as lift Israeli checkpoints in the West Bank, if the Palestinians stopped firing Qassam rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israel and stopped smuggling arms into the Gaza Strip from Egypt. Both Hamas and Israel rejected the plan, Israeli officials complaining that bomb makers and engineers with the knowledge to build Qassams would travel from the Gaza Strip into the West Bank and that the checkpoints were necessary to prevent the movement of terrorists.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Hassan M. Fattah, "Accord Is Signed by Palestinians to Stop Feuding," *The New York Times*, 9 February 2007.

<sup>57</sup> Harvey Morris, "Israel Pleads for Hamas to Remain in Isolation," *The Financial Times*, 19 March 2007.

<sup>58</sup> Glenn Kessler, "Secretary Rice to Try New ME Formula," *The Washington Post*, 23 March 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Cited in Avi Issacharoff, "Hamas, PRC Say Will Act to Torpedo New U.S. Benchmarks for Israel," *Ha'aretz*, 5 May 2007.

As Rice pursued her strategy, Olmert appeared to go over her head by ingratiating himself with Bush and Vice-President Cheney. Thus, speaking to an AIPAC meeting in April 2007, he publicly opposed an American withdrawal from Iraq and in May he condemned US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's "mishandling" of the Israeli conditions for peace in her discussions with Syrian leader Bashar Assad – comments that echoed Vice-President Cheney's criticism of the Pelosi visit. Needless to say, leaders of the US Democratic Party took a dim view of Olmert's comments and his apparent close identification with the Bush Administration.<sup>60</sup> Olmert also followed the US lead in refusing to negotiate with Syria despite Bashar Assad's offer to resume peace negotiations with Israel; Rice, seeking (albeit with limited success) to isolate Syria, had reportedly told Olmert, "It is best you avoid even exploring this possibility."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> These statements by Olmert are analyzed in Shmuel Rosner, "Is the Democratic-Israeli Disengagement Getting Out of hand?" *Ha'aretz*, 20 April 2007, and Nathan Guttman, "Dems Warn Olmert about Playing Politics," *Forward*, 20 April 2007.

<sup>61</sup> Cited in Ze'ev Schiff, "U.S. Envoy Denies Pressure on Israel Not to Engage in Talks with Syria," *Ha'aretz*, 21 May 2007.



## VII. From the Hamas Seizure of Power to Operation Cast Lead

Secretary of State Rice's efforts to expedite the Israeli-Palestinian talks got an unexpected boost, when, in June 2007, the escalating fighting between Hamas and Fatah led to the seizure of the Gaza Strip by Hamas and the crackdown on Hamas by Fatah in the West Bank. While the Hamas seizure of the Gaza Strip was a blow to Palestinian unity, it did provide the Bush Administration with the opportunity to try to make the West Bank a showcase while the Gaza Strip, under a tightening Israeli blockade because of Hamas rocket fire and the continued imprisonment of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, who had been captured in 2006, would stagnate.

Thus the US began a major programme of economic aid to the West Bank and stepped up its efforts to train Fatah's West Bank security forces, a policy continued by Bush's successor, Barack Obama. At the same time the Bush Administration moved to further assist Israel in the security field, promising Israel US\$30 billion in military assistance over the next decade and promising to maintain Israeli's qualitative military edge over its Middle Eastern enemies.<sup>62</sup>

However, the Bush Administration not only refused to attack Iran's nuclear installations itself, it also opposed an Israeli attack on Iran, despite the fact that Iran's leaders were rejecting International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) requests for information about the possible weaponization of Iran's nuclear fuel, which Iran was continuing to enrich despite opposition from US, the EU and the IAEA.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> For an analysis of the US efforts to bolster Israeli Security, see the report by Andrew J. Shapiro, Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs, delivered to the Brookings Institution, 16 July 2010.

<sup>63</sup> The leading US opponent to an American attack on Iran was Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, who was appointed to his post by George W. Bush in 2006 and retained by Barack

As the Bush Administration was seeking to strengthen Abbas' Fatah-led West Bank economically and militarily, it was also seeking to build an anti-Iranian coalition of forces, primarily made up of Sunni Arabs, to support a renewed effort to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement. By convening a major international conference at Annapolis, Maryland bringing together the leading Arab states, the Diplomatic Quartet, representatives of the World Bank and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, along with Israeli leader Ehud Olmert and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, the Bush Administration sought to give an Arab and international imprimatur for the renewed peace talks, thereby giving Abbas additional political cover against Hamas.

The fact that the Arab League, in 2007, had again come out with its peace plan, first introduced in 2002 at the height of the Al-Aqsa intifada, was seen as also being helpful to Abbas. Nonetheless, the difficulties the two sides had in even agreeing to an opening joint statement foreshadowed some of the negotiating problems that lay ahead, although with the help of Condoleezza Rice a joint statement was worked out – literally at the last minute – which stated the goal of the meeting,: “We agree to immediately launch good faith bilateral negotiations in order to conclude a peace treaty, resolving outstanding issues, including all core issues, without exception...and shall make every effort to conclude an agreement before the end of 2008.”<sup>64</sup>

To facilitate the negotiations a number of committees were set up to deal with the major issues dividing Palestinians and Israelis, although the principle that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” made it difficult to monitor the day-by-day success of the negotiations. In order to expedite the negotiations, Rice made numerous trips to the Middle East and according to Bush in his memoirs, *Decision Points*, Olmert made a very significant offer to Abbas covering the central issues in the conflict under which (1) Israel would return the “vast majority” of the West Bank to the Palestinians, (2) a tunnel would be built linking the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, (3) a limited number of refugees would return to Israel, with the rest of the returning refugees going to the new Palestinian state, (4) Jerusalem would be

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Obama. For Bush's view of a possible US attack on Iran see George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, pp. 417-420.

<sup>64</sup> For the text of the joint statement, which Bush read at the opening of the Annapolis Conference, see *The Israel-Arab Reader* (ed. Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin) (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), pp.625-626.

the joint capital of both Israel and the Palestinians and (5) control of the Holy Places would be given to a panel of “non-political elders.” According to Bush, Olmert was to travel to Washington and “deposit” the offer with the US President, Abbas would then announce that the plan was in line with Palestinian interests and Bush would then convene the two leaders to finalize the deal.<sup>65</sup>

Unfortunately for all concerned, the deal was not consummated. Bush gives as the reason the fact that Olmert was under investigation on a series of corruption charges and Abbas did not want an agreement with an Israeli Prime Minister soon to leave office.<sup>66</sup> While there is truth to the Bush assertion (Olmert was forced to step down as Prime Minister, to be replaced by Israeli Foreign Minister Tzpi Livni as Acting Prime Minister and new Israeli elections were set for February 2009 when Livni proved unable to put together a ruling coalition), there would appear to be more to the story than Olmert’s weakness. Abbas himself, after the defeat of his forces in the Gaza Strip was also seen as a weak leader, while Bush by the time of the Annapolis Conference, with Congress now controlled by the Democrats and facing continued difficulties in Iraq and a renewed insurgency in Afghanistan, was very much a lame-duck President.

In any case, while Olmert and Abbas and their teams had been negotiating, the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip had been heating up. A Hamas-Israeli ceasefire had become increasingly shaky and by the end of November 2008 Hamas forces had begun to fire volleys of rockets into Israel, making life in Israeli regions north and east of the Gaza Strip increasingly difficult for the Israeli civilians. By the end of December 2008, Israel had decided on a policy of massive retaliation for the Hamas rocket attacks and mounted a major invasion of the Gaza Strip under the code name “Operation Cast Lead.”

Unlike the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict of 2006 where the US, after the first two weeks of that conflict, had pressured Israel to stop fighting in order to preserve the pro-Western Siniora government, this time Israel was fighting Hamas, an organization on the US terrorist list and the US gave full backing to Israel. However, this was to be the last Middle East policy decision taken by the Bush

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<sup>65</sup> Bush, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 408-409.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p. 410.

Administration, which was replaced on 20 January 2009 by the Administration of Barack Obama.

## **VIII. The Obama Administration:**

### **A Preliminary Appraisal**

One of the Obama Administration's first acts after taking office was the appointment of former US Senator George Mitchell, who had served as the mediator of the Northern Ireland peace agreement and who had also played a role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as special envoy to the Arab-Israeli peace process. This demonstrated Obama's serious interest in achieving the Arab-Israeli peace settlement. A major challenge to Obama's peace-process efforts, however, was to come less than a month after he took office with the Israeli elections of 10 February 2010 which brought into office, at the end of March, a right of centre Israeli government under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu – the same Netanyahu who had clashed with Obama's Democratic Party predecessor, President Bill Clinton during 1996-1999. It was not long before there were also clashes between Netanyahu and Obama, in part due to their different world views and in part due to their different Middle East priorities.

## IX. Obama's Approach to World Affairs

In all US Presidential transitions, especially when one party replaces another which has been in office for two terms, the new incumbent seeks to demonstrate that his policies are different from his predecessor's. This was the case when George W. Bush replaced Bill Clinton and it was also the case when Barack Obama replaced Bush. Thus when Obama took office, he made major effort to show that in foreign policy he would replace the unilateralism of the Bush era with a policy of outreach to countries which had come into sharp conflict with US during the Bush Administration. These included Iran, Syria, Cuba, Venezuela, Russia, China, North Korea and Myanmar. The operative assumption of the Obama Administration appeared to be that if you meet your opponent halfway, he would reciprocate. While such an assumption appeared to be dangerously naïve to many critics of Obama, including those in Israel, the Administration held fast to this policy during its first year.

A second aspect of the Administration's approach involved outreach to the Muslim world. In speeches in both Turkey and Egypt, Obama sought to portray the United States as a friend of the Muslim world, not an enemy, despite the US wars in the Muslim countries of Iraq and Afghanistan. To emphasize this point, Obama played down the Islamic nature of the terrorism which the US faced, much to the displeasure of conservatives in the United States who condemned him for giving a free ride to Islamic Terrorism.<sup>67</sup> A third aspect of the new policy was a cooling of ties with Israel, after the warm, if not cozy relationship of the Bush years. Obama appeared to feel that such a cooling would help the US appear more even-handed in the Arab-Israeli conflict and thus facilitate US peacemaking efforts to solve the conflict. Thus early in the Administration, Obama called for a halt in settlement construction, including in Jerusalem, despite the understanding reached by Bush and Sharon in April 2004.

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<sup>67</sup> A leading critic of the Obama Administration's policy on Islam has been the conservative *The Washington Times*, whose editorials and op-eds. regularly condemn Obama for being weak on Islam. Former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has also been critical. Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel, 2011)

In addition, while making trips to Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, Obama failed to visit Israel, despite being urged to do so by a number of American Jewish organizations, including those affiliated with the liberal “J-Street” movement. Reinforcing the chill in relations was the fact that while Obama was a left-of-centre liberal, Netanyahu was a right-of-centre conservative. Gone were the days when the conservatives Bush and Sharon could easily relate because they saw the world in the same focus. Indeed, in the very first public meeting between Obama and Netanyahu in May 2009 the tension between the two leaders was clearly visible in their “body language” as they issued statements following the meeting.

In addition to their different political perspectives, Obama and Netanyahu differed on Middle East priorities. To Netanyahu, Iran was the primary issue. With the Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad continuing to call for Israel to be wiped off the face of the earth and strengthening Iran’s ability to do so by rapidly developing Iran’s nuclear capability, Netanyahu pressed Obama to take action against Iran. For Obama, however, the priority was to try to get the Iranians to change their policies by dialogue not force and during his first year in office, Obama made numerous appeals to the Iranian regime for improved relations, only to be continually rebuffed.

For his part, Obama saw a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict as the priority in the Middle East, seeing such a solution both as a means of weakening Iran’s proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas, pulling Syria away from Iran and of rallying the Sunni Arab world against Iran, should it not respond to his outreach policy.<sup>68</sup> Here again, the settlement issue was key as Obama felt that by getting Israel to stop settlement building in Jerusalem and the West Bank, the resumption of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations would be facilitated and an overall settlement of the conflict brought closer.<sup>69</sup> Unfortunately for Obama, as he would later ruefully admit, he did not

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<sup>68</sup> According to the revelations of *WikiLeaks*, by 2006 most of the Sunni Arab leaders were already vehemently anti-Iranian and some, like Saudi Arabia, were urging a US attack on Iran’s nuclear installations, a development that by 2009 Obama was undoubtedly aware of. Nonetheless, Obama seems to have thought that an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement would have made it easier for these Arab leaders to have rallied their people against Iran. David E. Sanger, “Around the World, Distress over Iran”, *The New York Times*, 28 November 2010.

<sup>69</sup> In his June 2009 Cairo speech, Obama said “The US does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements” (cited in Ethan Bronner, “New Focus on Settlements:

understand the changes in Israeli politics that had been caused by the Israeli-Hezbollah war of 2006 and the Israel-Hamas war of December 2008-January 2009.

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Obama Pressures Israelis over West Bank, but Effort to Stop Growth Faces Hurdles”, *The New York Times*, 6 June 2009.



## X Israel's Move to the Right

The Israeli elections of 2009 reflected a clear move to the right by the Israeli body politic. Netanyahu's right wing Likud party jumped from 12 to 27 seats and the right of centre Yisrael Beiteinu party of Avigdor Lieberman rose from 11 to 15 seats. At the same time, the left wing Meretz Party dropped from 5 to 3 seats and the left-of-centre Labour party fell from 19 to 13 seats. In explaining the shift to the right, one factor is clear – the policy of unilateral withdrawals in an effort to win peace had not worked. Thus although Ehud Barak had unilaterally withdrawn from Southern Lebanon in 2000; instead of attaining peace with Lebanon, Israel had to endure repeated rocket attacks leading up to a major war with Hezbollah in 2006 which the centrist Kadima Party did not wage effectively.

Similarly, Israel's withdrawal of both settlements and military bases from the Gaza Strip in 2005, instead of facilitating the peace process, brought increased rocket fire from the Gaza Strip, which Hamas had seized in 2007, leading to the major Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip in December 2008. Given these events, the majority of Israelis were not only wary of any further withdrawals, which, as Netanyahu pointed out in the campaign, would bring Tel-Aviv and Ben-Gurion airport into rocket range, but were also highly suspicious of the Palestinians, whose Hamas-Fatah split made any final Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement a far-off possibility, at best. Making matters worse was a general feeling that Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas was well-meaning but weak and that his Prime Minister Salam Fayyad was honest but without a political base. In addition, the stance of Israel's Arab community (20 percent of the Israeli population) had become problematic to Israel's Jewish majority, as the leaders of the Arab community increasingly sided with Israel's Arab enemies while at the same time demanding the replacement of Israel as a Jewish State, with Israel "as a state of its peoples."<sup>70</sup> Given this turn to the right, Obama's pressure on Israel was received

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<sup>70</sup> As'ad Ghanem and Mohamad Mustafa "Coping With the Nakba: The Palestinians in Israel and the 'Future Vision' as a Collective Agenda", *Israel Studies Forum*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2009), pp. 52-66.

coldly and Obama's popularity, as measured in Israeli polls, fell to the single digits.<sup>71</sup>

Consequently Netanyahu initially took a hard line on the Middle East peace process, refusing to agree to a two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and promoting an active Jewish settlement programme in the West Bank. Under heavy US pressure, however, he modified his position. Thus in June 2009, in a speech at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, Netanyahu agreed to a two state solution albeit with the important qualification that Jerusalem would remain united under Israeli control.<sup>72</sup> Then in November 2009 Netanyahu also agreed to a ten-month partial settlement construction ban, although a ban that did not include Jerusalem.

In making these concessions, Netanyahu actually went further than the Arabs, whom Obama had also pressured. Thus Abbas had refused to enter into negotiations with the Netanyahu government until all settlement activities, including in East Jerusalem, ceased; Syria did not break with Iran, as Obama had hoped, or even stop assisting Hamas and Hezbollah (Syria continued to provide arms to Hezbollah, in violation of UN Security Resolution 1701) and Saudi Arabia refused to provide the confidence building measures to Israel, such as providing over flight rights for Israeli airlines, which Obama had requested.

However, by the beginning of 2010, it initially looked like the split between Obama and Israel might be overcome. Obama had begun to take a tougher stand on Iran, after the Iranian government, now beset by increasing domestic dissent, continued to rebuff Obama's call for improved ties and rejected international efforts to deal with Iran's nuclear enrichment efforts. In addition, a tougher tone had begun to enter the Obama Administration's diplomatic vocabulary, after the apparent failure of outreach efforts toward Venezuela, Cuba, Myanmar and North Korea. As far as Israel was concerned, Obama had publicly stated in a *Time Magazine* interview on 1 February 2010 that he had "overestimated" the US ability to get the Israelis and Palestinians to engage in a "meaningful

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<sup>71</sup> Cited in Gil Hoffman, "Only 6 % of Israelis see US Government as pro-Israeli", *The Jerusalem Post*, (Online), 19 June 2009.

<sup>72</sup> The text of Netanyahu's 14 June 2009 speech can be found at: [http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2009/Address\\_PM\\_Netanyahu\\_Bar-Ilan\\_University\\_14-Jun-2009.htm](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2009/Address_PM_Netanyahu_Bar-Ilan_University_14-Jun-2009.htm)

conversation” because of the domestic political problems both sides faced.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, the US had backed off from its calls for a full settlement freeze and had accepted the partial freeze which Netanyahu had proposed. Nonetheless, despite this apparently improving situation in US-Israeli relations, a crisis erupted in mid-March 2010, during the visit of US Vice-President Joe Biden to Israel.

There were several aspects of the crisis. First, after a great deal of effort, the US had gotten Palestinian Authority leader Mahmud Abbas to agree to resume peace talks with Israel, albeit at the low level of indirect or proximity talks under which the US Middle East Special Envoy, George Mitchell, would shuttle between the two sides. Biden’s trip to Israel was aimed, in part, to add the US imprimatur to the start of the talks which had been endorsed by the Arab League, thus giving Abbas a modicum of legitimization.

However, as the date of Biden’s visit to Israel approached, the situation in East Jerusalem had become more explosive. The Israeli government, either with Netanyahu’s active support, or with his toleration, had begun to accelerate the construction of Jewish housing in Arab populated neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem such as Silwan and Sheikh Jarrah, while at the same time destroying Arab-owned housing in these neighbourhoods and elsewhere in East Jerusalem, because they had been “illegally” constructed, that is, built without the municipal permit which, under an Israeli “Catch 22” policy, is almost impossible for East Jerusalem Arabs to obtain. This had inflamed Arab opinion. In addition, the Israeli government, in February had added both the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron and Rachel’s Tomb (a Jewish religious enclave near Arab Bethlehem, just south of Jerusalem, surrounded by high walls and watchtowers) to the list of Jewish heritage sites across Israel and the West Bank which have been slated for millions of dollars of renovation work.<sup>74</sup>

The Palestinians had seen these actions as further attempts by Israel to unilaterally extend its control over areas which they want for their future Palestinian State. For the Palestinians, control over Arab East Jerusalem is seen as vital because, for both political and religious reasons, they want it as the capital of their long-hoped

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<sup>73</sup> Obama interview with Joe Klein, *Time Magazine*, 1 February 2010.

<sup>74</sup> Joshua Mitnik, “Holy Sites Stir Anger in Israel”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 March 2010.

for Palestinian State and with the Jewish construction in Arab East Jerusalem, it appeared that this hope was rapidly slipping away.

Thus the announcement, in the midst of Biden's visit, that Israel was going to construct an additional 1600 homes in East Jerusalem, even though the construction was to take place in the all-Jewish neighbourhood of Ramat Shlomo, was literally the straw that broke the camel's back as far as the Palestinians were concerned and they refused to enter into the indirect negotiations to which they had been committed. This, in turn, not only undermined the Biden mission, it also undermined the months-long diplomacy which the Obama Administration had been actively pursuing to get the Israeli-Palestinian talks underway. Netanyahu's response that he had been unaware of the announcement before it had been made was seen as specious by the Obama Administration which appeared to lose trust in the Israeli leader.

Following the fiasco of the Biden visit, where heated words were exchanged between Netanyahu and high ranking members of the Obama Administration<sup>75</sup> and a failed Netanyahu visit to Washington ten days later, a debate appeared to break out in the Administration as to what to do. One group argued that it was time for the US to come up with its own plan for an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement and in well-placed leaks in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in early April, the Obama Administration was portrayed as actively considering coming up with its own peace plan.<sup>76</sup> Advocates of this position cited then CENTCOM commander David Petraus' argument in a mid-March 2010 policy paper that the Arab-Israeli Conflict was damaging the US position in the Middle East, although in the 35 page paper the conflict was actually only mentioned twice,<sup>77</sup> and Petraus was later to claim that his position had been misunderstood.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Yossi Alpher, "Too Many Constraints on the Administration" in *The US-Israel Crisis and the Peace Process*, (*Bitterlemons: Online*), 22 March 2010.

<sup>76</sup> For example, Helene Cooper, "Weighing an Obama Plan to End a Middle East Logjam", *The New York Times*, 8 April 2010.

<sup>77</sup> See the statement of General David H. Petraus before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the future of the US Central Command (Washington, DC: Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 16 March 2010).

However, others in the Obama Administration argued that the US could not want a solution more than the parties themselves. President Obama, in a news conference at the end of April appeared to come down midway between the two positions, thereby enabling the US to keep both options open. Thus on the one hand Obama stated:

Even if we are applying all of our political capital to that issue (solving the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict), the Israeli people through their government and the Palestinian people through the Palestinian Authority, as well as other Arab States, may say to themselves – we are not prepared to resolve this – these issues – no matter how much pressure the United States brings to bear – and the truth is, in some of these conflicts the United States can't impose solutions unless the participants in these conflicts are willing to break out of old patterns of antagonism. I think it was former Secretary of State James Baker who said, in the context of Middle East peace, we can't want it more than they do.

But, on the other hand, Obama also noted that an Israeli-Palestinian peace was a “vital national security interest of the United States” and that “what we can make sure of is that we are constantly present, constantly engaged” and he also said “I’m going to keep at it.”<sup>79</sup>

Meanwhile, as discord between the Obama Administration and Netanyahu continued, nearly 300 members of the United States Congress, who were sympathetic to Israel, had made their position clear in a letter to Secretary of State Clinton in late March, in which they expressed “deep concern” over the US-Israeli crisis:

The US and Israel are close allies whose people share a deep and abiding friendship based on a shared commitment to core values including democracy, human rights and freedom of the press and religion. Our two countries are partners in the fight against terrorism and share an important strategic relationship. A strong Israel is an asset to the national security of the United States and brings stability to the Middle East. We are concerned

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<sup>78</sup> Natash Mozgavaya, “Petreus to Ashkenazi: I Never Said Israeli Policy Endangers US”, *Ha'aretz*, (Online), 27 March 2010.

<sup>79</sup> Cited in Hilary Leila Krieger, “Forcing the Peace”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 30 April 2010.

that the highly publicized tensions in the relationship will not advance the interests the US and Israel share. Above all, we must remain focused on the threat posed by the Iranian nuclear weapons programme to Middle East peace and stability.

We recognize that, despite the extraordinary closeness between our country and Israel, there will be differences over issues both large and small. Our view is that such differences are best resolved quietly, in trust and confidence, as befits longstanding strategic allies. We hope and expect that with mutual effort and good faith, the United States and Israel will move beyond the disruption quickly, to the lasting benefit of both nations.<sup>80</sup>

Perhaps heeding the call of Congress, or realizing that without a good working relationship with Israel, the US could not move the peace process forward, the Obama Administration moved in early May to resume its efforts to convene the indirect talks between Israel and the Palestinians and also to improve relations with Israel. The indirect talks were, in fact, resumed and the US made a major gesture to Israel by granting it an additional US\$205 million in military aid, over and above the US\$3 billion per year which Israel was getting, to help it expand its *Iron Dome* anti-missile system that would help protect Israel against rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip and Lebanon.<sup>81</sup> For his part, Netanyahu appears to have reciprocated by putting a de-facto freeze on construction in East Jerusalem.

At the same time, however, Obama's effort to eliminate nuclear weapons from the world, an effort which appeared partially aimed at putting additional pressure on Iran to scrap its nuclear enrichment programme, came into conflict with Israel's need for nuclear weapons as a deterrent against a possible attack by its enemies, principally Iran and the Arab countries which had not yet made peace with it. Consequently, Israel was unhappy with the US decision in late May 2010, at a review session for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to support a call for Israel to join the treaty, a development that would force it to disclose and then give up its nuclear weapons. Israel was further concerned that the conference's final document did not mention Iran's failure to comply with IAEA demands to

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<sup>80</sup> Cited in Natasha Mozgavaya, "Nearly 300 Congress Members Declare Commitment to US-Israeli Bond", *Ha'aretz*, (Online), 27 March 2010.

<sup>81</sup> AFP Report, "Obama Seeks Funds to Boost Israeli Rocket Defences" *Turkish Daily News* (Online), 16 May 2010.

stop the enrichment of uranium. The US support for the document contrasted sharply with that of the Bush Administration during the 2005 treaty review conference when the US refused to sign a similar declaration calling for Israel to join the treaty.<sup>82</sup>

Despite this disagreement, by July US-Israeli relations appeared to be on the upswing. The US had refused to join the Arab and Turkish condemnation of Israel over the Flotilla incident of 31 May in which Israel intercepted a Gaza-bound flotilla and killed nine Turkish Islamists who were resisting the Israeli capture of one of the ships in the flotilla (the others surrendered peacefully). In July, Netanyahu again visited Washington and this time his reception was much more cordial than during his previous visit in March at the height of the crisis over the announcement of the construction plan for new housing in East Jerusalem. Obama, after meeting Netanyahu, stated “The US will never ask Israel to do anything that undermines its security” and also emphasized that the bond between Israel and the United States was “unbreakable.”<sup>83</sup>

By early September US diplomacy had scored a minor breakthrough when Abbas, with the backing of the Arab League, had finally agreed to enter into direct negotiations with Israel. The timing was, however, problematic. The end of Israel’s partial settlement freeze was set for 26 September—just three weeks after the formal start of the direct negotiations. Despite a great deal of pomp and ceremony in Washington, little was actually accomplished in the three weeks of direct talks and when the partial settlement construction freeze ended, Israel resumed construction in the settlements and East Jerusalem—actions which Obama called “unhelpful” and which prompted Abbas to break off negotiations.<sup>84</sup>

At this point the US floated an offer to Netanyahu to get him to extend the settlement building moratorium for an additional 90 days, in the hope that a general border delineation could be worked out by that time so that future Israeli

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<sup>82</sup> Janine Zacharia and Mary Beth Sheridan, “Israel Angry at Being Singled Out in Action Plan on Nuclear Weapons”, *The Washington Post*, 30 May 2010.

<sup>83</sup> Cited in Sheryl Stolberg, “Easing Tension with Obama, Israeli Leader will Push Talks” *The New York Times*, 6 July 2010.

<sup>84</sup> Cited in Barak Ravid, “Obama: East Jerusalem Building Plans Unhelpful to Peace Efforts” *Ha’aretz*, (Online), 9 November 2010.

settlement construction would take place only in areas which Abbas and Netanyahu would agree would remain part of Israel under a land swap arrangement. Reportedly, the offer included providing Israel with an additional 20 F-35 Stealth fighter planes, (Israeli had already planned to buy 20), a security treaty between the US and Israel and pledges by the US to protect Israel against efforts by the Palestinian Authority to get the UN Security Council to vote for the establishment of a Palestinian State, even without an agreement with Israel.<sup>85</sup>

Despite this generous offer, which would have enhanced Israeli security in a major way Netanyahu refused to accept the US initiative, which was subsequently taken off the bargaining table. Meanwhile the US and Israel continued to differ over policy toward Iran. In the face of strong urging by Israel—and as the *WikiLeaks* revelations have shown also by a number of Arab states for military action against Iran,<sup>86</sup> the US continued to resist calls for an attack on Iran, arguing that the sanctions which the US, the EU and the UN Security Council has enacted against Iran were the proper path. As Secretary of Defence Robert Gates noted, “We even have some evidence that (Supreme Religious Leader, the Ayatollah) Khomeini now (is) beginning to wonder if (Iranian President) Ahmadinejad is lying to him about the impact of the sanctions on the economy. And whether he is getting the straight scoop in terms of how much trouble the economy really is in...A military solution as far as I am concerned...it will bring together a divided nation. It will make them absolutely committed to obtaining nuclear weapons...and they will just go deeper and more covert.”<sup>87</sup>

As US-Israeli relations remained tense, because of differences over policy toward Iran and over the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton made a major address on US policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on 9 December 2010 at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC. After noting that the US commitment to Israel’s security and to its future remained “rock

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<sup>85</sup> For descriptions of the proposed US-Israel deal, see Charles Levinson, “Netanyahu Supports US Plan for Freeze” *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 November 2010 and Joel Greenberg, “Netanyahu Moves on US Incentives for Construction Freeze in West Bank”, *The Washington Post*, 15 November 2010.

<sup>86</sup> David E. Sanger, “Around the World...”

<sup>87</sup> Cited in Reuters Report, US Defence Chief Says Iran Sanctions Working, Argues Against Military Strike”, *Ha’aretz*, (Online), 16 November 2010.



solid”, Clinton asserted that solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was a national interest of the United States and could not be postponed, because the continuing conflict strengthened “the hands of extremists and rejectionists across the region while sapping the support of those open to coexistence and cooperation” Clinton then announced a change in the US strategy to achieve such a peace agreement.

Instead of just concentrating on the settlement issue, which had been the Obama Administration’s policy in its first two years, Clinton said it was now time to “grapple with (all) the core issues of the conflict, on borders and security, settlements, water, refugees and on Jerusalem itself.” Clinton also stated that “no matter how much the United States and other nations around the region and the world work to see a resolution to this conflict, only the parties to the conflict will be able to achieve one and that the United States and the International Community cannot impose a solution.” She concluded by chiding both the Palestinians and the Israelis to downplay the past and work toward a settlement, asserting “the people of the region have to move beyond a past that they cannot change and embrace a future they can shape together.”<sup>88</sup>

As 2011 began one of the issues that had bedevilled US-Israeli relations—the issue of an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities—appeared to be removed, at least temporarily, from the US-Israeli agenda. The primary reason was a computer virus, called STUXNET, reportedly jointly developed by the United States and Israel, that had seriously infected Iran’s Nantanz nuclear centrifuge facility.<sup>89</sup> Because of STUXNET, as well as an increasingly effective US-led sanctions effort against Iran and the assassination of key Iranian nuclear scientists, the outgoing Israeli chief of MOSSAD Meir Dagan asserted that Iran would not be able to produce nuclear weapons until 2015.<sup>90</sup> While some Israelis, including Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, as well as some Americans thought Dagan’s estimate

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<sup>88</sup> Clinton’s speech can be found at [www.State.Gov/Secretary/Rm/2010/12IS2664](http://www.State.Gov/Secretary/Rm/2010/12IS2664), 11 December 2010.

<sup>89</sup> William Broad et al, “Israel Tests on Worm Called Crucial in Iran Nuclear Delay”, *The New York Times*, 16 January 2011.

<sup>90</sup> Herb Keinon, “As Nuke Talks with Iran Resume, Israel Urges Forceful Action”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 21 January 2011 and Roula Khalaf et al, “The Sabotaging of Iran”, *The Financial Times*, 12 February 2011.

was overly optimistic, at least for the time being, the issue of Iran, which had become a divisive one in US-Israeli relations, receded in importance.<sup>91</sup>

While the delay in Iran's nuclear programme was of benefit both to the United States and to Israel, another development in early 2011 raised serious questions for the leaders of both countries. This development was the outbreak of popular uprisings throughout the Arab World, called by some commentators the "Arab Spring", which began in Tunisia and quickly spread to Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and Morocco. For the United States, there was the concern that long-time allies of the US such as Presidents Ben-Ali of Tunisia and Mubarak of Egypt who, as noted above, had been helpful to the United States in trying to facilitate an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, as well as the Khalifa family of Bahrain which hosted the US Fifth Fleet, President Saleh of Yemen, who was an ally, if a troublesome one, in the fight against Al-Qaida and King Abdullah II of Jordan, would be overthrown. Adding to these fears was the concern that Islamists might come to power if the existing regimes fell.

It was, for the United States, an almost classic case of the clash between national interests of keeping US allies in power and national values of supporting the democratic aspirations of the leaders of the popular uprisings. Indeed, President Obama was to discuss this dilemma in his speech on the Arab uprisings on 19 May 2011 (see below). Given this conflict, the US was slow to support the leaders of the popular movements in Tunisia and Egypt, although in mid-January 2011, as street battles in Tunisia were escalating, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, speaking at a conference on democracy in Doha<sup>92</sup>, Qatar, strongly criticized Arab governments for stalled political change and warned that extremists could exploit a lack of democracy to promote their political agendas. Clinton's emphasis on the need for democracy appeared to be a reversal of the previous Obama policy, which, in another departure from the Bush Administration, had appeared initially to downplay the issue of democratization. Indeed, as Obama had noted in his Cairo speech in June 2009, "no system of government can or should be imposed on one nation by any other."<sup>93</sup> By contrast, Clinton asserted in Doha

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<sup>91</sup> Robert O. Freedman, "Stuxnet's Impact", *Baltimore Jewish Times*, 28 January 2011.

<sup>92</sup> Cited in Jay Solomon, "Clinton Raps Arabs for Lack of Reform", *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 January 2011.

While some countries have made great strides in governance, in many others people have grown tired of corrupt institutions and a stagnant political order. Those who cling to the status quo may be able to hold back the full impact of their countries' problems for a little while, but not forever. If leaders don't offer a positive vision and give young people meaningful ways to contribute, others (extremist elements and terrorist groups) will fill the vacuum.<sup>94</sup>

One month later, following the ouster of Egyptian President Mubarak from power, President Obama seemed to echo Clinton, as he stated that the uprising in Egypt had "changed the world" and he pledged US support for a "genuine transition to democracy."<sup>95</sup> Thus by February 2011 it appeared that US policy had, in many ways, returned to the old George W. Bush democratization policy.

From the Israeli perspective, the "Arab Spring" of popular uprisings was also problematic. Especially in the case of Egypt, there was the fear that anti-Israeli Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood could take power, despite the fact that they were latecomers to the anti-Mubarak demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square that brought down Mubarak in mid-February 2011. Following Mubarak, the Egyptian military took control of the country, formed an interim government and stated it would honour the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement of 1979. The actions of the new government including scheduling early Parliamentary elections which the Israelis feared would enable the well-organized Muslim Brotherhood to dominate Egypt's Parliament, warming Egypt's ties with Iran, announcing the opening of Egypt's blockade of the Gaza Strip and calling for a renegotiation for the Israeli-Egyptian natural gas agreement (Israel currently depends on Egypt for 40 percent of its natural gas needs) were worrisome to the Israelis.

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<sup>93</sup> Cited in Ryan Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy", *New Yorker*, 2 May 2011, p.70.

<sup>94</sup> Cited in Mathew Lee, "Without Reform, Arabs face disaster", *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 January 2011.

<sup>95</sup> Cited in Daniel Domberg, "Obama Vows Help Towards Democracy", *The Financial Times*, 12 February 2011.

In any case, it was not long before Israel had problems closer to home. In mid-March there was a sharp increase in the number of rockets and mortar rounds fired from the Gaza Strip into civilian areas of Israel (some fired by Islamic Jihad and some by Hamas) and many Israelis feared that the deterrence benefits which Israel had achieved as a result of Operation Cast Lead in late 2008 and early 2009 had evaporated. At the height of the escalating conflict, a Hamas-fired rocket hit an Israeli school bus, killing a 16 year old Israeli student. The Israelis retaliated forcefully, hitting a number of targets in the Gaza Strip including weapons smuggling tunnels and Hamas and Islamic Jihad rocket teams and by the end of April a ceasefire, of sorts, had been worked out. US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates visited Israel in the midst of the fighting and condemned both the rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip and a terrorist attack in Jerusalem that took place in March.<sup>96</sup>

Meanwhile, negotiations between Israel and the Abbas-led Palestinian Authority remained frozen. In part because he had been embarrassed by the “Palileaks” expose’ by Al Jazeera which described the concessions which he had been willing to make to former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert<sup>97</sup>, in part to gain popular support at a time of protest movements throughout the Arab World and in part because Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu had refused to stop housing construction in West Bank settlements (the US had vetoed a UN Security Council denunciation of the housing construction in February 2011); Abbas had begun to push the idea of a UN General Assembly Resolution proclaiming a Palestinian State and had sent emissaries around the world to garner support for a projected UN General Assembly action in September 2011.

In addition, after years of futile negotiations with Hamas, by May 2011<sup>98</sup> Abbas had reached a preliminary agreement with the Gaza-based organization to form an

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<sup>96</sup> Cited in Isabel Kirshner, “In Israel, Gates Condemns Recent Attacks From Gaza”, *The New York Times*, 25 March 2011.

<sup>97</sup> Tobias Buck, “Ramallah Accuses Al-Jazeera of Plot to Weaken Abbas”, *The Financial Times*, 25 January 2011. For an anti-Abbas (and anti-US) view of the documents, see “The Palestine Papers: Chronicling The US Abandonment of the Road Map”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Spring 2011) pp.84-114)

<sup>98</sup> Isabel Kirshner. “UN Praises Palestinians’ Progress Toward State”, *The New York Times*, 23 April 2011 and Aaron David Miller, “A Palestinian Plan That’s Doomed to Fail”, *The Washington Post*, 15 April 2011.

interim national unity government to prepare for elections in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In making this interim agreement, Abbas was not only responding to popular calls in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for a reconciliation, but he was also able to exploit the weakening position of Hamas in Syria, where its leadership was based, because of the escalating anti-Assad rioting there, as well as Hamas' greater willingness to cooperate with Egypt whose new government was far more sympathetic to the organization than Mubarak's had been and which helped to mediate the agreement. Netanyahu reacted angrily to the Hamas-Fatah agreement and stated he would have nothing to do with that government so long as Hamas, which remained dedicated to the destruction of Israel, did not change its programme.

As the Israeli-Palestinian relationship worsened and as the popular uprisings in the Arab World grew in intensity, US President Barack Obama was faced with yet another dilemma—what to do about Libya. When a group of Libyans sought to oust Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi and Qadhafi vowed to murder all those opposing him, the Arab League and a number of European leaders led by French President Nicholas Sarkozy, called for a no-fly zone to protect Libyan civilians from Qadhafi.

Obama, somewhat belatedly agreed to join in a military effort to establish the no-fly zone (after the UN Security Council voted in favour of it<sup>99</sup>), although Obama called on his partners in NATO to take the lead in the operation, despite the fact that the US was, by far the leading military power in NATO, although one bogged down by wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama justified US military action in a speech to the National Defence University on 28 March 2011 in which he stated that if he had failed to act, the Libyan city of Benghazi, held by Qadhafi's opponents, would suffer a massacre that “would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world.”<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, some commentators, evaluating Obama's speech and the limited role which the US

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<sup>99</sup> Full text of the UNSC Resolution 1973 adopted on 17 March 2011 can be found at: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/268/39/PDF/N1126839.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>100</sup> Cited in remarks by the President in address to the nation on Libya, The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 28 March 2011.

President had projected for the US military in Libya, called Obama's position a case of "leading from behind."<sup>101</sup>

In addition to having to confront a series of major changes in the Arab World, a stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process and a war in Libya—to go along with a continuing, albeit declining, US military effort in Iraq and an escalating war in Afghanistan—Obama also had to confront a difficult domestic situation with a high unemployment rate (nine percent in May 2011) that hampered his re-election effort, and, following the Fall 2010 elections, Republican control of the US House of Representatives, that had led to a bitter budget battle over the growing US deficit. The one bit of good news for Obama during the late Spring was a successful raid by a US SEAL commando group on the home of Osama Bin-Laden in Pakistan that resulted in the death of the terrorist leader responsible for a series of attacks, the most important of which was 9/11. Given Obama's close personal involvement in the mission, which in many ways resembled the targeted assassinations carried on by Israel, the success of the mission at least temporarily strengthened his domestic position.

By May 2011, with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process stalled, Obama was coming under increasing pressure, both domestically and from America's NATO allies, to present a US plan to solve the conflict.<sup>102</sup> In mid-April, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton had already articulated the US frustration with the stalemate in the peace process in a speech to the US-Islamic Forum when she stated, "The status-quo between Palestinians and Israelis is no more sustainable than the political systems that have crumbled in recent months,"<sup>103</sup> In addition, Obama's Republican opponents in the US House of Representatives, trying to exploit for their political benefit the ongoing chill between Obama and Netanyahu, had invited the Israeli Prime Minister to address a joint session of Congress in late May.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Cited in Lizza, p. 55.

<sup>102</sup> Cited in Helene Cooper, "Diplomatic Race over Peace Plan for Middle East", *The New York Times*, 21 April 2011.

<sup>103</sup> Cited in Edmund Sanders, "Israel Pressed to Offer Peace Initiative". *Los Angeles Times*, 19 April 2011.

<sup>104</sup> Cooper, *The New York Times*, 21 April 2011

Adding to the pressure on Obama was the resignation of the chief US Middle East peace mediator George Mitchell on 13 May 2011, given the fact that, in an effort to demonstrate his Administration's interest in solving the conflict, Obama had appointed Mitchell to his position on his second day in office in January 2009.<sup>105</sup> As a result of all these pressures, Obama apparently decided on the eve of Netanyahu's speech to the US Congress, to outflank the Israeli Prime Minister by adding a section on US strategy for achieving an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement to his speech on the US response to the Arab Spring which had already been scheduled for 19 May 2011 at the US State Department.

The bulk of Obama's speech<sup>106</sup> dealt with US support for the democratic movements in the Arab world. After noting the tension between American interests and American values, Obama appeared to give priority to values, noting "after decades of accepting the world as it is in the region, we have a chance to pursue the world as it should be." Obama went on to assert, "The United States supports a set of universal rights. And these rights include free speech, the freedom of peaceful assembly, the freedom of religion, equality for men and women, under the rule of law and the right to choose your own leaders—whether you live in Baghdad or Damascus, Sana'a or Tehran... Our support for these principles is not a secondary interest. Today I want to make it clear that it is a top priority that must be translated into concrete actions and supported by all of the diplomatic, economic and strategic tools at our disposal." In addition, Obama emphasized the need for proper treatment of religious minorities in the Arab world, noting "Coptic Christians must have the right to worship freely in Cairo, just as Shia must never have their mosques destroyed in Bahrain." Obama also strongly argued for women's rights in the Arab world, asserting "the region will never reach its full potential when more than half of its population is prevented from achieving their full potential."

In his section on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Obama made a number of major gestures to Israel. Thus he displayed his empathy with Israelis "living in fear that their children could be blown up in a bus, or by rockets fired at their homes" and

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<sup>105</sup> Steven Lee Myers, "Amid Impasse in Peace Negotiations, America's Chief Middle East Envoy Resigns", *The New York Times*, 14 May 2011.

<sup>106</sup> Full text of Obama's speech can be found at:  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>

“knowing that other children in the region are taught to hate them.” Obama also stated his strong opposition to Arab efforts to delegitimize Israel, called for two states for two peoples—Israel as a Jewish state and the homeland for the Jewish people (a clear repudiation of the mass return of Palestinian refugees to Israel), asserted that the proposed Palestinian state had to be non-militarized, demanded that the Palestinian leadership deal with Hamas’ unwillingness to recognize Israel’s right to exist and also put strong emphasis on Israel’s security needs, noting that in any Israeli-Palestinian agreement, security arrangements had to be robust enough to: (1) prevent a resurgence of terrorism, (2) stop the infiltration of weapons and (3) provide border security.

Obama also reiterated the American position that the US would not seek to impose a peace agreement. Nonetheless, he emphasized, as Secretary of State Clinton had done in her speech to the US- Islamic Forum in April that the status-quo was unsustainable. In addition, he stated that Israeli settlement activity on the West Bank was “an obstacle to peace”, called on Israel to “act boldly” to advance a lasting peace and noted that the dream of a Jewish and democratic state could not be fulfilled with permanent occupation.

In his most controversial statement, Obama put into words what had been the practice not only of US Presidents but of Israeli and Palestinian negotiators over the past decade since the Camp David II Summit in July 2000 when he stated that “the borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps, so secure and recognized borders are established for both states” Obama also came out with a third iteration of the US strategy to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. After having tried first in the 2009-2010 period to kick start the peace process by concentrating on trying to stop Jewish settlement expansion in East Jerusalem and the West Bank and from December 2010 to April 2011 to deal with all the core issues simultaneously—and succeeding in neither strategy—Obama now suggested beginning with border and security issues first and only then turning to the “wrenching and emotional issues” of Jerusalem and the fate of Palestinian refugees.

Despite Obama’s emphasis on the need to assure Israeli security in a Palestinian-Israeli settlement, an emphasis he repeated in his speech to an AIPAC conference several days later, his comments about the 1967 border set off a firestorm of criticism among right-wing circles in Israel—Netanyahu openly criticized Obama’s plan—as well as among Israel’s supporters in the US Congress, led by



Republican Congressmen and Senators. Nonetheless, Obama's speech did serve to, at least in part, outmanoeuvre Netanyahu, whose speeches both to AIPAC and to a joint session of Congress were in large part a reaction to Obama's 19 May speech. In any case, the Obama speech of 19 May serves as a useful point of departure for evaluating US policy toward Israel under George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

## CONCLUSIONS

In comparing the Bush Administration's policy toward Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict with that of the Obama Administration, there are both similarities and differences. In the area of similarities, both Administrations have committed themselves to Israeli's security. Of the US\$5 Billion in US foreign aid, Israel is the recipient of US\$3 Billion, 60 percent of the total. In a 2007 memorandum of understanding with Israel, under the Bush Administration, the United States committed itself to supply Israel with US\$30 Billion in security assistance over the next decade and not only has the Obama Administration agreed to continue funding security assistance to Israel at that level, it has added US\$205 million to it to support Israel's *Iron Dome* anti-rocket system that has already helped protect Israel against rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip. A second similarity is that neither the Bush Administration nor the Obama Administration has supported Israel's calls for an American attack on Iran's nuclear installations and both were hesitant to support an Israeli attack on Iran as well, although by early 2011, the issue of Iran had receded in importance as a factor in the US-Israeli relation. Third, both the Bush and Obama Administrations supported Israel as a "Jewish State"

Despite these similarities, there have been a number of differences and in the mind of the Israeli public at least, they tend to outweigh the similarities. First and foremost have been the differences over Israeli settlement building. While no US Administration has formally supported the building of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and the Administration of George W. Bush's father, George Herbert Walker Bush, actually came into sharp conflict with Israel over this issue in the early 1990's, George W. Bush, in April 2004, tacitly supported Israel's continued building in the major settlement blocs when he stated "in light of new realities on the ground, including already existing population centres, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of the final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949." By contrast early

on in his Administration Obama came out strongly against settlements not only in the West Bank outside the settlement blocks, but in the settlements blocs and in Jerusalem as well. While Netanyahu agreed to a partial settlement freeze, one not including East Jerusalem, the settlement issue has been a major cause of conflict between Israel and the Obama Administration, reaching a peak during the visit of US Vice-President Joe Biden to Israel in March 2010.

A second difference can be seen in the different worldviews of the two Administrations. George W. Bush was a conservative with a black-and-white understanding of terrorism, one that was reinforced by 9/11. In this, both Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, a conservative and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, a moderate conservative, were very much on the same wavelength as Bush and this reinforced their relationship. By contrast, Obama is a liberal and his view of the world has clashed with that of Netanyahu, also a conservative. A third difference can be seen in the different approaches to Iran. Bush, in his first term, sought to isolate Iran and although in his second term he proved willing to cooperate with key European Union states in their efforts to get Iran to stop enriching uranium, relations between the US and Iran remained hostile during Bush's entire term of office. By contrast, Obama's outreach policy toward Iran—one that so far at least has proven as unsuccessful in getting Iran to stop enriching uranium as Bush's had been—was seen as the height of naiveté by Netanyahu, who saw the time spent by Obama in trying to win over the Iranian leadership as more time for Iran to develop its nuclear weapons.

A related outreach programme by the Obama involved Syria – a country which the Bush Administration sought to isolate following the assassination of Lebanese Sunni leader Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Obama apparently hoped that by warming up relations with Syria, it could not only get the Syrians to stop the infiltration of anti-US fighters into Iraq, but also to get Syria to break its ties with Iran and stop aiding Hamas and Hezbollah. So far that policy has also not worked very well as the Syrian-Iranian ties appear as strong as ever and there is no evidence that Syria has cut off support for Hamas and Hezbollah. Indeed, by May 2011 Obama begun to openly criticize Syria as well as sanction the Assad Regime for its brutal crackdown on demonstrators. Yet another difference between Netanyahu and Obama lies in Obama's pursuit of a nuclear-free world. Obama appeared to the Israelis to be sacrificing their interests by not insisting, at the minimum, that no

pressure should be put on Israel to give up its nuclear weapons until after a comprehensive Middle East peace agreement had been achieved.

Another major difference between the two Administrations has been their approaches to the Arab-Israeli peace process. Bush, after 9/11, sought to end the Al-Aqsa intifada and move to a Palestinian state living in peace alongside Israel. While the Obama Administration has had the same goal, Bush's post-9/11 efforts, unlike Obama's, tended to be episodic and all but ceased after both the Zinni mission to the Middle East and the 2003 Road Map were sabotaged by Palestinian terrorism. It was not until Arafat's death and the subsequent election of Mahmoud Abbas as the Palestinian Authority's President that the US could move ahead with its peace plan, given the fact that unlike Arafat, Abbas was a strong opponent of terrorism.

Unfortunately for Bush, however, Abbas proved to be a weak leader and the US Middle East democratization programme, which had become a centrepiece of the Administration's policy in the Middle East, foundered when Hamas won the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in January 2006. Bush's strategy suffered another blow with the stroke to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in January 2006 soon after his unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Then the Palestinian government collapsed when Hamas seized power in the Gaza Strip, in June 2007, signalling a major split in the Palestinian movement. By the time, with the war in Iraq going badly and with the Democrats having won control of both houses of the US Congress in the mid-term election of 2006, Bush was very much a "lame duck" President. His subsequent efforts at peacemaking – the convening of the Annapolis Conference in November 2007 did not prove successful although if one is to believe Bush's memoirs the two sides did come close. However, the fact that the Bush Administration came to an end as war was raging between Israel and Hamas, illustrates the failure of the Bush Administration's peace-making strategy.

Obama, by contrast, has had a very different approach. Unlike Bush's episodic approach to Middle East peacemaking, Obama's was continuous, although he has had to revise his strategy on several occasions. In part this was due to a desire to show he was different from Bush – a pattern typical when the President of one political party replaces a two-term President of the other party. We saw this in George W. Bush when he replaced Bill Clinton. Thus whereas Clinton had been personally involved in the Arab-Israeli peace process, particularly in his second

term, convening summits at the Wye Plantation and the Camp David and personally negotiating with Syrian leader Hafiz Assad, the failure of his efforts convinced Bush to initially take a hands off approach to the conflict which he basically did until 9/11. Similarly, Obama also made a major effort to distance himself from his predecessor's policies.

Thus while Bush was inactive in pursuing the Arab-Israeli peace process at the start of his presidency, Obama on his second day in office appointed George Mitchell as his special Middle East mediator. In addition, while mention has already been made of Obama's outreach policies toward Iran and Syria, Obama also undertook a major outreach effort to the Muslim and Arab worlds with speeches in Turkey and Egypt in an effort to show that despite the fact that the US was involved in wars in two Muslim countries, Iraq and Afghanistan, the US was not at war with Islam. To emphasize this point Obama downplayed the Islamic nature of the terrorism which the US faced – much to the displeasure of conservatives in the United States who claimed that Obama was whitewashing Islamic terrorism. At the same time, however, he appeared to deliberately cool ties with Israel. Thus despite the advice of members of the J-Street Lobby, his American Jewish allies in the peace process, who told him in July 2009 that he should visit Israel, by May 2011 he had not done so. Sending Vice-President Biden to Jerusalem, as he did in March 2010, was seen by most Israelis as a poor substitute – and a belated one at that.

Essentially Obama's peace-making strategy has gone through six periods up through May 2011. During the first, lasting through most of 2009, he sought to get Israel to agree to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and stop building settlements, the PA under Abbas to return to direct negotiations with Israel, Syria to cut its ties to Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates to make confidence building gestures to Israel such as allowing Israeli civilian over flights of their countries and visits by Israeli businessmen. This ambitious plan, however, did not prove successful.

While Netanyahu did accept a two-state solution, albeit with conditions and adopted a ten month partial settlement freeze (not including East Jerusalem), Abbas did not agree to direct negotiations, Syria did not cut ties with Hamas, Hezbollah or Iran and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates refused to make confidence building measures with Israel. This led the Obama Administration to undertake a reappraisal of its policy at the end of 2009 and by February the

Administration had decided on a more modest policy. Obama himself acknowledged in a *Time* magazine interview in February 2010 that the US had overestimated its ability to bring about a settlement and the US now sought to get indirect or proximity talks underway between Israel and the Palestinians. Joe Biden's visit to Israel in mid-March 2010 was supposed to kick off the talks, but instead precipitated a crisis in the US-Israeli relations as the Israeli government embarked on plans to add 1,600 housing units in East Jerusalem. The crisis led to another reappraisal of US policy and there were well-placed leaks in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* that the US was about to issue its own peace plan.

Obama, however, did not endorse the suggestion to issue his own peace plan and went back to trying to get the indirect talks started, something he succeeded in doing in May and a July 2010 Netanyahu visit to Washington was much more cordial than his March visit had been. Nonetheless, the indirect talks did not bear fruit other than to finally get Abbas' agreement to enter into direct talks with Israel, something that took place in early September 2010 with Obama and Secretary of State Clinton looking on. In the third stage of US peacemaking, yet this appeared to be too-little-and-too-late as Netanyahu's partial settlement freeze ended on 26 September and the Netanyahu government then reverted to its old policy of settlement building, leading Abbas to break off negotiations. The US then made a major offer of security assistance to Israel, including the provision of 20 F-35 fighter aircraft to Israel in return for a 90 day extension of the settlement freeze, an offer Israel did not accept, thus ending the fourth phase of the US effort.

Following Netanyahu's rejection of the Obama offer, the US changed its policy. In a speech to the Brookings Institution on 9 December 2010, Secretary of State Clinton downplayed the settlement issue in favour of dealing with all of the core issues—Jerusalem, refugees, water, borders, security, as well as the settlements. This strategy also did not prove successful, as the Palestinian-Israeli peace process remained frozen and in May 2011 Obama announced still another strategy—to deal with the issues of borders and security first and then deal with what Obama called the more “emotional issues”—Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees. It remained to be seen whether this strategy would be any more successful than the previous two had been.

In one area, however, the policies of the George W. Bush and Obama Administrations began to draw closer by the spring of 2011. This was in the area

of Middle East democratization. After downplaying the issue of democratization during his first two years in office, the emergence of the Arab Spring in 2011 appeared to shift Obama's position and by May, in a major policy speech at the US State Department, he strongly endorsed the emerging democratic trends in the Arab World.

In sum, while there have been important similarities between the George W. Bush and Obama Administrations in their policies toward Israel, particularly in their both providing military aid to help assure Israeli security, there have also been major differences particularly over Israel's settlement building policy and over the Arab-Israeli peace process. Given the differences that have become noticeable over the first two and a half years of the Obama Administration, one may well expect more differences until the end of Obama's Presidency.

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