

The “Yes, We Can” Slogan Stranded In Obama’s Myriad of Vows

Jalel Ben Haj Rehaïem
University of Sfax, Tunisia

Abstract

At the beginning of his presidency in January 2009, President Obama not only made an effort to mobilize the Middle East to support his bid for “change”, but he also mobilized the English language to achieve his purpose; and for the first time, we heard pledges to break the U.S.-Israel “kabuki dance” . With his vows to adopt a different posture, President Obama changed George W. Bush’s tone and rhetoric towards the Muslim world, and promised to commit the United States to bring about an end to the 60-year Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He initially condemned Israeli settlements, the major obstacle to peace for decades now, as “illegal”, and set their “complete freeze” as a prerequisite to resuming peace talks between the Palestinians and the Israelis. It did, after all, seem to the Palestinians too good to be true that the settlements had to stop before the peace process would get back on track.

Near the end of Obama’s second term now, Obama’s slogan of “yes, we can” in the Middle East has been stranded in his procrastination whether to confront Israel’s right wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Consequently, change has become more and more elusive, and the prospects of peace in the region are in shambles. President Obama gradually backed away from his condemnation of Israel’s settlements policy in the Palestinian territories. Obama’s failure to make good on his words with respect to the peace process became gradually clear in his three U.N. General Assembly talks from 2009 to 2011 which this work takes as case studies. The tone and the verbiage of these three speeches revealed that Obama’s 2009 promises of change would most likely fail to materialize, and the initial euphoria of Obama’s vows of resetting the button of the US foreign policy in the Middle East was incrementally dampened with each of Obama’s U.N. General Assembly speeches. In the end, all that changed for the Palestinian-Israeli peace process are the tone and the rhetoric rather than the reality of things on the ground. With at least two bloody wars have been fought in Gaza in October 2012 and July 2014, and when war crimes were committed , the situation has even deteriorated and the prospects of peace have become more and more elusive since Obama took office in January 2009.

Abstract: Obama, Netanyahu, Palestine, Settlements, United Nations, Quartet, change

ARTICLE

As former President George W. Bush used to look at the world from the prism of good and evil, President Barak Obama, distancing himself from Bush’s apocalyptic vision of world politics, has said that he sees the world consisting of countries with varying interests and values . The Bush administration relied solely on hard military power and unilateralism; Obama promised at the beginning of his first term in January 2009 to bring an end to America’s unilateralism, as force always failed to change foes into faithful friends. Obama vowed to take a new path, ostensibly to embellish America’s image in the Middle East, which was heavily tarnished, particularly by his predecessor’s obvious bias towards Israel . It was a path, however, that would not necessarily be new in character but certainly new in its tone. “Tone is not mere form”, as Antony Blinken, the deputy secretary of state and a former White House speechwriter, puts it. “Tone matters, especially in some communities where you have a sense of grievance born out of a history of humiliation” (Traub, Foreign Policy, February 2015) . It

seemed at the beginning that the change Obama promised was not only a change of tone but also of posture and consciousness.

In other words, President Obama said all the right things in the right tone. Embracing new sentiments and a new style, he took the issue to the Muslim world, and he did it in the right style. In his speech in Turkey on April 6, 2009, President Obama said that "all of us have to change. And sometimes change is hard" (*italics added*) .

Indeed, tangible change in the Middle East has been not only "hard" but also unattainable; President Obama's multiple promises for "change" in the region notwithstanding. He vowed a new beginning in the U.S.-Muslim world interaction during his famous Cairo speech on June 4, 2009 before a rapt audience. He promised "change" in the American approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and a deeper American involvement in order to bring this conflict to an end. Aware of the sense of urgency to deal with the "demonization of America" in the Muslim world, largely because of the perceived American bias in handling the Israeli-Palestinian issue, Obama stated that he was not going "to wait until the end of [his] administration to deal with Palestinian and Israeli peace", as his predecessors had always done. He also stated that "ultimately, people [we]re going to judge [him] not by [his] words but by [his] actions and [his] administration's actions" ; such a strong rhetoric opened a glimmer of hope among the populace in the Middle East.

Hence comes the *raison d'être* of this article which seeks to answer the central question whether Obama's new political discourse in 2009 has been just a "change" of tone rather than a change of strategy. The longitudinal demarcation line of this paper is January 2009 when Barak Obama was inaugurated as the 44th President of the United States, which almost coincided with the March 2009 second Benjamin Netanyahu government in Israel, up to the last of Obama's remarks before the United Nations General Assembly on September 22, 2011.

The methodology has been based on a selection of a corpus consisting of a sample of President Obama's speeches about the Israeli settlements problem in relation to resuming the peace process. The selection of data has been dictated by the political importance and content of the speeches and remarks regarding the main questions of this paper. The longitudinal method is also adopted in order to highlight the incremental as well as the chronological shift in Obama's political discourse and overtures with respect to the issue of Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories and the Arab-Israeli conflict in general.

This work, however, does not seek to analyze the impact the myriad pro-Israel lobbies in the United States have had on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, as this question was extensively studied by John Mearsheimer and Steven Walt (2007). The corpus of this article, however, consists of a sample of Obama's speeches, primarily his two major Muslim speeches—the Turkey Speech on April 6, 2009 and the Cairo Speech of June 9, 2009—and his three United Nations General Assembly speeches in 2009, 2010 and 2011, which will also be studied extensively. Studying these speeches and remarks will highlight the flip-flopping position of the Obama administration on the core issue pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict- settlements—which is the major obstacle to an ultimate solution for a chronic problem that needs action on the ground rather than words in the air. President Obama started by stating in June 2009 that Israeli settlements "violate[d] previous agreements and undermine[d] efforts to achieve peace" and ended in May 2011 by warning that the United States "will hold the Palestinians accountable for their actions and for their rhetoric" .

From 2009 to 2011 Obama's rhetoric about the settlements issue in the West Bank became gradually more procrastinating and less vigorous until he reached the point at which he was just seeking a face-saving exit to avoid a diplomatic row with Israel after Netanyahu rejected the U.S. President's pressure regarding the freeze of Israeli settlements in the West Bank as a precondition for resuming the peace process. Therefore, the main purpose of this work is to explore the hypothesis that Obama's new reconciliatory political discourse toward the Middle East at the beginning of his first term was just a change of tone rather than a change of strategy, and not a deviation from America's classic posture in the Middle East.

First and foremost, there has been little controversy that Israeli settlement in the Palestinian territories is illegal from the standpoint of international law. Article 6 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, for example, notes that "the Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies". Moreover, the International Court of Justice was clear about the legal standing of the Israeli settlements. The 2004 Court ruling on this issue stated that "the Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, are illegal and an obstacle to peace and to economic and social development [and] have been established in breach of international law".

Up to the first Obama's administration there was little "change" with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which has stalled because of one structural issue—Israeli Settlements in the 1967 occupied territories, where more than 310,000 Israelis live in settlements in the occupied West Bank, besides the 200,000 who live in a dozen settlement neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. So far, Israeli constructions in the occupied territories have caused virtually all of Obama's promises of a tangible "change" in the U.S.-Middle East relationship to fail, and dampened most of the enthusiasm about Obama's initial vows of bringing to an end a 63-year conflict. A conflict whose resolution needs not a political miracle but the political will to do so, as the peace terms are already detailed in international documents, such as the Quartet's "Road Map" and the pertinent United Nations resolutions since 1947. Obama himself said on May 19, 2011 that "while the core issues of the conflict must be negotiated, the basis of those negotiations is clear".

Furthermore, the U.N. Security Council Resolution 465, which was unanimously adopted in 1980, stated that "Israel's policy and practices of settling parts of its population and new immigrants" in the Occupied Territories constitutes "a serious obstruction to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East". The Security Council then called upon Israel to "dismantle the existing settlements and in particular to cease, on an urgent basis, the establishment, construction or planning of settlements in the Arab territories occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem". As for the United States official position on this issue, it was already expressed in Herbert Hansell's words more than thirty years ago. Hansell was a State Department legal adviser who wrote in 1978 a letter to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs stating that "the establishment of the civilian settlements in those [Palestinian] territories [wa]s inconsistent with international law". Practically, however, successive American administrations till 2009, except the 1976 Carter administration, failed to recognize publicly the illegality of Israeli settlements.

By the advent of the 2009 Obama administration, however, President Obama adopted an unprecedented rigorous tone regarding what were called "illegal" Israeli settlements in the 1967 occupied territories. For the new Obama administration, the settlements issue was now a serious obstacle to resuming peace talks between the two parties. During his first direct

contact with the Middle East in Cairo in June 2009, President Obama stated, among other things, that "the United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements". He also added that settlement "construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop" (ibid). "In Cairo, Obama delivered the most ambitious, the most eagerly anticipated, and the most excruciatingly crafted foreign-policy address of his first term, and perhaps of his presidency to date" (Traub, Foreign Policy, February 2015).

Moreover, in his September 2009 speech to the U.N. General Assembly President Obama also said "We continue to emphasize that America does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements", which was a further assertion of his strong position regarding the settlements issue already expressed in his historic Cairo Speech in June 2009. Though Obama fell short of announcing that Israeli settlements were an obstacle to peace, and just regarded them as illegitimate, pre-conditioning the resumption of the stalled peace process with a settlements freeze was already revolutionary posture.

This dramatic shift, at least in the U.S. perception of, if not strategy towards, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was further confirmed by President Obama when he admitted on the National Public Radio (NPR) in July 2009 that "there [were] times where we [were] not as honest as we should be about the fact that the current direction, the current trajectory in the region [wa]s profoundly negative, not only for Israeli interests but also U.S. interests" (Italics added). Never before did an American incumbent publicly admit that the U.S. pro-Israel policies were not conducive to American interests and its image in the Middle East, which was understood as a break with the past American posture in the region. Obama's NPR statement confirmed what John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago and Stephen Walt, the then dean of the Law School in Harvard, had advanced in 2006 in their prominent work "The Israel Lobby", and were criticized for what was perceived by the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) champions as an "anti-Semitic" stance.

The Obama administration then pledged to break up the ongoing "kabuki dance" between the United States and Israel for decades, and with that pledge people in the Middle East believed it was a rare opportunity to end once and for all the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate. For the United States, resolving the Israeli-Palestinian problem was already of strategic significance to national security. Former President Bill Clinton had stated, during a visit to Egypt in October 2010 that resolving the Israel-Palestine problem "would have more impact by far than anything else that could be done". Furthermore, on the issue of settlements, Clinton said that the Israelis "complicated the problem demographically by not doing this in 2000. It must be done" (ibid). Therefore, it became widely accepted among the Obama administration that a credible American commitment to settling the Israeli-Palestinian issue would be in the best interests not only of the Palestinians but also of the United States as well (Mattair, "Israeli-Palestinian Peace: What Is the U.S. National Security Interest?", Middle East Council, Journal Essay). This was true for an already damaged image of the United States in the Middle East, especially after eight long years of Bush's trail of wars of choice.

Hillary Clinton, Obama's Secretary of State, herself showed at the beginning of the Obama administration the same vigor and forcefulness when demanding a full freeze on settlements and vowing to continue pressuring Netanyahu with an unusually blunt call for a halt to settlement growth. She reassured the Palestinians that this time the Americans "intend[ed] to press that point". Secretary Clinton, in a meeting with Arab foreign ministers in Morocco on November 2nd, 2009, stated that the United States rejected a recent offer by Israel just to

“restrain” settlement construction, for it fell short of U.S. expectations of a complete freeze instead of “restraint” as a prerequisite to restart the peace process (*italics added*).

As for the Palestinians, Presidents Arafat and Abbas kept complaining for almost two decades about Israeli construction in the West Bank and Jerusalem, but accepted to conduct peace talks with Israel while construction in the Jewish settlements never stopped. The complaints from the Palestinian leadership were sporadic, but at no time did the Palestinians put a complete settlement freeze as a pre-condition for peace talks (*ibid*). Khaled Abu Toameh, an Israeli-Arab journalist who is perceived by Palestinians as a “traitor” for his pro-Israel views, in the Hudson New York online argues that “Abbas and his predecessor, Yasser Arafat, talked and worked with Israel while the construction was continuing. Abbas was negotiating with former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni, while the settlements were being expanded. Ironically, the Olmert government built more in the settlements than the “right-wing” government of Binyamin Netanyahu”.

Abu Toameh goes further to ask why “the Palestinian leaders “forgot”, when they signed the Oslo Accords with Israel in 1993, to demand that the agreement include an Israeli commitment to stop building the settlements” (*ibid*). There was also no mention at all of Palestinian “self-determination” or “independence” or “a Palestinian State” in Oslo Accords. Moreover, though the October 2002 Road Map presented by former President George W. Bush on behalf of the Quartet specified that “consistent with the Mitchell Report, [Israel] [ought to] freeze all settlement activity (including natural growth of the settlements)”, Israel never stopped “constructions”, to use Israel’s euphemism in referring to the contentious issue of settlements in the occupied territories.

Israel, however, perceived settlements and peace talks as two “separate” processes, and the Palestinians continued to talk to successive Israeli governments, the continuing of settlements notwithstanding. Why successive Palestinian governments had accepted to negotiate with the Israelis without necessarily setting a freeze on settlements as a pre-condition, as the Obama administration did in 2009, needs to be further explored, though this question is beyond the scope of this work.

By the advent of the Obama administration and the latter’s adoption of a historically strong position vis-à-vis the settlements issue, however, the Palestinian Authority could not be softer on the Israelis than the Americans themselves. President Abbas found himself in the uncomfortable position where President Barack Obama appeared to be more Palestinian than the Palestinians themselves with respect to the settlements issue. As a consequence, the Palestinian Authority joined the Obama call for a full freeze on settlement expansion as a pre-condition before any peace negotiations could restart.

Accordingly, Gary Ackerman, the New York Congressman and a staunch friend of Israel, argued that if Israel was serious about making peace with the Palestinians, Tel Aviv had to stop seeking “sticks and tricks” to evade U.S. peace initiatives, like that of Obama, which particularly called for a settlement freeze as a prerequisite to putting the peace process back on track. Furthermore, Debra DeLee, the former Chair of the Democratic National Committee and the president and CEO of Americans for Peace Now said that “in early 2009 we felt that Obama genuinely mean[t] it when he sa[id] he intend[ed] to push vigorously for a comprehensive Middle East peace deal that include[d] the creation of a Palestinian state”. She

continued saying that they believed that President Obama "mean[t] what he sa[id] and sa[id] what he th[ought]" (ibid).

The intensity and vigor of the Obama posture regarding the settlements issue not only surprised the world but also stunned the Israelis themselves. Robert Malley, former special assistant for Arab-Israeli Affairs to Clinton, commented that "the surprise in this is not the Israeli position. The surprise is the forcefulness of the American one. Rarely have we seen it at this pace and with this intensity and unambiguity. The United States has taken a position that doesn't give much wriggle room at all to the Israeli government". What was also surprising was the unusual link President Obama himself made between Israeli intransigence with respect to the settlements issue and America's national security (ibid), which was the strongest statement ever by an American president over the settlements question.

In Israel, Netanyahu's second government of March 2009, which ran in and won the 2009 general elections in Israel on a right-wing, neoconservative and anti-peace platform, was categorical about the settlements question. It is worth mentioning here that during his first term as Prime Minister from June 1996 to July 1999 Netanyahu was in constant conflict with the Clinton administration over how to implement the 1993 Oslo Accords. Then Netanyahu speeded up illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem (ibid). Politically, he opposed the 1993 Oslo Accords and "he ran for the [2009] elections on a pledge of giving a proper burial to the peace process".

Avigdor Liberman, Netanyahu's Foreign Minister, said in April 2009 that Israel was not obligated to abide by the November 2007 Annapolis agreement to pursue peace talks with the Palestinians. As for Netanyahu, he found it difficult to accept a complete freeze on settlements, given his political affiliation with the right-wing Likud Party, for such a posture would also have caused his neoconservative coalition with Liberman's ultra-nationalist party Yisrael Beiteinu and the ultra-orthodox Shas party to founder. Although the Israeli Labor Party was part of Netanyahu's team, it [seemed that] it lost "all of its values" by joining a right-wing government, as former Labor Minister Moshe Shahal said.

Moreover, in reaction to Obama's new stand on the issue of Israeli settlements, Israel's new interior Minister said in the Kenesset that Tel Aviv would not take orders from the United States, and Israel did not want to become America's 51st state. "Israel does not take orders from Obama", was the reaction of Gilad Erdan, a senior Cabinet Minister belonging to the Likud Party. Erdan said that the people of Israel, by voting for Netanyahu, had sent a message that "they will not become the 51st State of the U.S". It was the first time that Israel and the United States, two traditional and strategic allies, would talk to each other through the media. It was unprecedented to see that Washington and Tel Aviv would argue tit for tat, and publicly. Was this a good reason to believe that the U.S.-Israel special relationship was foundering? If we let facts speak for themselves, the answer is hardly yes.

America's attempts to mediate peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis were simply motivated by a basic variable—peace was in Israel's interest as President Obama himself made clear during his last AIPAC speech of May 22, 2011. He said that the U.S.-Israel "friendship [wa]s rooted deeply in a shared history and shared values. Our commitment to Israel's security is unshakeable...And it is precisely because of our commitment to Israel's long-term security that we have worked to advance peace between Israelis and Palestinians".

Encouraged by Obama's procrastination in front of a strong Israel lobby in Washington, DC., and already having quite a good experience in playing the White House against Capitol Hill, as he had done in 1996 with former President Bill Clinton, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu not only rejected all of Obama's attempts to pressure him into a complete and permanent freeze on settlements so that peace talks could resume, but he also went further to try to dictate Obama's foreign policy priorities. Netanyahu argued from day one in power that America's priority ought to be Iran's nuclear program before any peace talks could restart.

Nevertheless, taking almost a year to test Obama's will and vigor, Benjamin Netanyahu proposed in November 2009 a ten-month moratorium on settlements in the West Bank but not in East Jerusalem, for he believed that the latter was Israel's "indivisible" capital. "We do not put any restrictions on building in our sovereign capital", Netanyahu said in his moratorium announcement, which he characterized as a gesture of good will that "will help launch meaningful negotiations to reach a historic peace agreement that would finally end the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians". At the beginning, Netanyahu's temporary and partial moratorium was quickly welcomed by the Obama administration as a step toward resuming the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Hillary Clinton also hailed the moratorium decision and said that "Today's announcement by the government of Israel helps move forward toward resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict".

Netanyahu's moratorium, however, turned out to be a political and diplomatic trap for the Palestinians. The decision to freeze settlement-building was an Israeli maneuver to show to the United States and the world that Israel was indeed interested in peace, and even on American terms. According to Haaretz, Netanyahu told his right-wing cabinet that "this step will advance Israel's broad international interests. This is not a simple step, nor an easy one; but it has many more advantages than disadvantages...It will enable us to show the world this simple truth: The Government of Israel wants to enter into negotiations with the Palestinians, is taking practical steps to enter into negotiations and is very serious in its intention to advance peace".

Indeed, Netanyahu's moratorium was meant to turn the tables on the Palestinians. He and his cabinet knew that the Palestinian Authority would not be able to accept a partial, instead of complete, freeze on settlements, as the Palestinians had already accepted Obama's pledge of a "complete" and irrevocable freeze on settlements in the 1967 occupied territories, where the prospective Palestinian state would be founded (*italics added*). Moreover, Netanyahu understood that the Palestinians would turn down any Israeli freeze suggestion that would not include East Jerusalem, which they want to be the capital of their future state. In brief, the Netanyahu partial and temporary settlements freeze fell short of the minimum conditions for them to accept resuming peace talks, as it did not meet Obama's initial request for a "complete" stop of Israeli settlements. So, Netanyahu's freeze initiative was just meant to absorb U.S. and world pressure to respond to serious calls to resume the peace process with the Palestinians and to refute the allegation that the stalled peace process was Israel's fault.

Eventually, Netanyahu managed to demonstrate, especially to the Obama administration, that it was the Palestinians' fault and not Israel's that peace talks could not be restarted. Besides, he was able to take American pressure off Israel for ten months, as the United States peace envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell spent the whole moratorium period shuttling in vain between the two parties to start what he first termed as proximity talks and then direct talks. Mitchell himself welcomed Netanyahu's moratorium, saying that "it falls short of a full settlement freeze, but it is more than any Israeli government has done before and can help

movement toward agreement between the parties...Nothing like this occurred during the Bush administration".

Meanwhile, the Netanyahu cabinet continued constructions in East Jerusalem, even in the presence of the U.S. Vice President Joe Biden. On March 8, 2010, while Biden was in Jerusalem on a state visit to Israel, purportedly to reassure the Israelis that if they were to accept returning to peace talks, America would guarantee their strategic edge against their neighbors, Netanyahu's Interior Ministry announced a new settlements package in East Jerusalem. The package included building 8,253 new homes, including 1,600 homes in the ultra-Orthodox settlement of Ramat Shlomo. The Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth published a similar list of 19 plans, identifying 7,038 housing units awaiting approval. All of them were in East Jerusalem settlements, including Givat Hamatos, Pisgat Ze'ev, Neve Ya'acov, Gilo and Ramot (ibid). Justifying Israel's move, Israeli cabinet secretary Zvi Hauser told Israel Radio that "Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and construction there will be carried out like in Tel Aviv or any other city – in every part of Jerusalem according to the plan...Jerusalem is a big city. It is a city that has to grow".

The Israeli settlement announcement, coinciding with the U.S. Vice President's visit, was a double blow; the first was to the peace process and the second to America's image and credibility in the region. It almost caused a diplomatic row between Washington and Tel Aviv, but in the end it turned out that America "had no better friend" than Israel as Biden himself rectified his previous condemnation of Israel's provocative settlements announcement during his presence in the country. One day before the Israeli announcement, Biden said that "progress occurs in the Middle East when everyone knows there is simply no space between the United States and Israel", but he soon realized that, with Netanyahu as premier in Israel, there was still a great deal of space if not between Israel and the United States, then definitely between Benjamin Netanyahu and Barak Obama.

In reaction to Israel's brazen move, Secretary of state Hillary Clinton condemned the surprise announcement and told the online Israeli Ynetnews paper that the "Netanyahu announcement of A plan to build more Jewish homes in East Jerusalem contradicts the spirit of Biden's Mideast trip and undermines confidence in peace process". But the public Israeli-American row soon dissipated and the maximum punitive measure the United States was able to take was the decision of Joe Biden to arrive 90 minutes late to a scheduled dinner with Prime Minister Netanyahu the following day. The tension between the two "friends", to use Biden's words, was lowered when Israel's Interior Minister, Eli Yishai, apologized for "the distress caused" to the person of the U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, who had spent the day assuring Israel of America's unconditional support if it accepted renewing peace efforts that would involve proximity negotiations as a confidence-building measure.

The Palestinians, seizing on Israel's settlements announcement in Biden's presence and building on previous American guarantees to push Israel into accepting a full curb on settlements, argued that they would not take part in any peace talks unless Israel cancelled the recently announced Ramat Shlomo construction plan. Hanan Ashrawi, a prominent Palestinian politician, said: "Israeli deliberate measures at expanding settlement activities, at carrying out further building of illegal settlements in and around Jerusalem – all these are designed to scuttle all American efforts at trying to re-launch any kind of talks be they direct or indirect, proximity or long-distance". In the end, it turned out that the Netanyahu cabinet had decided to announce its settlements surprise upon the arrival of Joe Biden and "sacrifice" America's friendship temporarily because it had learnt that the Palestinians had just yielded to Mitchell's

pressure to enter proximity talks despite the partial Israeli freeze on settlements. Netanyahu simply wanted to topple what George Mitchell had been trying to achieve for months—to get the Palestinians to approve peace talks with Israel while settlement-building was going on in East Jerusalem, ironically Palestine’s presumed capital.

Now as Netanyahu’s 2009 settlement moratorium was coming to an end in few months, the Obama administration decided to continue pursuing the reopening of the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. President Obama was clearly running out of time as the end of the moratorium on September 26, 2010 was looming, and Obama’s ability to bring Binyamin Netanyahu to extend his settlements moratorium would be his Middle East litmus test, and probably the last chance for the peace process under his first term. The Obama administration now needed to do something about resuming peace talks before the end of Netanyahu’s moratorium to save a peace process it had vowed to work on from day one in office, and not wait till the end of Obama’s term.

At the eleventh hour, President Obama organized a kind of peace conference on September 4, 2010 in Washington, D.C., to which he invited not only Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, but also King Abdullah of Jordan and the then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarek. Obama launched his initiative as a last-minute attempt to try to bring about a peace agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians within a year, which he described as a “moment of opportunity that may not soon come again”.

Obama’s initiative was seen as a test of his willingness to take the necessary political risks to live up to his early pledge of a new American policy in the Middle East. During the Washington peace conference, one heard agreeable words phrased eloquently, such as the Israeli Premier calling President Abbas “my partner in peace”, and the latter saying that their meeting was “a sincere opportunity to make peace”. As for President Obama, he was more realistic than his counterparts when he reminded the audience that he was “under no illusions. Passions run deep. Each side has legitimate and enduring interests...[and] years of mistrust will not disappear overnight” (ibid). But Obama restated that though resolving the conflict was in all parties’ national interests, Washington would not try to “impose a solution” (ibid), nor to impose on Netanyahu an extension on his settlements moratorium in almost two weeks time from the conference, which was understood as Obama’s first retraction from his initial commitment to a complete freeze on Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories. The question here was whether Netanyahu would meet Obama’s expectations or he would push him to lower the ceiling of his high expectations about Israel’s readiness for peace.

Within the three weeks between the September 2nd, 2010 Washington Peace Conference and the end of Netanyahu’s settlement moratorium on September 26, 2010, a handful of Israeli-Palestinian meetings took place in Washington and later in Egypt. Nothing came out of these meetings, because all the parties concerned focused more on whether Netanyahu would extend his settlements moratorium to give a chance for peace talks to resume or would jeopardize the last peace opportunity. Resuming settlements would also jeopardize America’s efforts over the previous two years to bring the two rivals back to the table of negotiations on the initial American basis that settlements were “dangerous” for the peace process and must therefore stop.

During this period, Middle Eastern politics was about guessing and threatening, rather than about talking peace. Netanyahu told Tony Blair, the then Quartet envoy of the Middle East

peace mediators on September 12, 2010, two weeks before the presumed end of his construction moratorium in the West Bank, that "the Palestinians demand that after September 26, there will be zero building [in the West Bank, and this] will not happen". The Palestinians in their turn reiterated time and again that "should the settlement construction and expansion continue, we are out" (ibid). Indeed, on September 26, 2010, Israeli bulldozers were back to work throughout the West bank and East Jerusalem, which theoretically constituted part of the Palestinian state. Work began on at least 2,000 new housing units and a number of new schools in Jewish communities throughout the Palestinian territories. Israeli Nationalists celebrated the end of the freeze, and new cornerstones were laid for new homes.

Eventually, Netanyahu carried out his pledge to his right wing cabinet and ended the settlements moratorium, but at the same time he expressed his wish that "President Abbas w[ould] remain in the talks and continue with me on the path of peace which we started three weeks ago". Netanyahu added that "many in the world have now realized that my intentions of reaching peace are serious and sincere and that I honor my commitments". The Israeli premier, however, ignored all pleas from both the Americans and the Palestinians alike not to jeopardize the last chance for peace and to extend his partial and temporary freeze on settlements in the West Bank. Benjamin Netanyahu also ignored a letter from President Obama requesting at least a sixty-day extension to the settlements moratorium beyond September 26, 2010.

David Makovsky from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy said that the U.S. President requested that Netanyahu extend his West Bank construction moratorium for just sixty days to give a chance for peace talks to take hold. Obama pleaded with Netanyahu in a letter negotiated with Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Chief Israeli peace negotiator Yitzhak Molch. The letter committed the U.S. to veto any probable U.N. Security Council proposal regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2011. Obama also sent his guarantees that he would not ask Netanyahu for another moratorium beyond sixty days, as the settlements issue ought to be dealt with as part of what was called "territorial swaps" (ibid).

The Obama letter to Netanyahu on the eve of the expiration of the latter's moratorium on settlements in the West Bank was mainly about an incentive package which included more F-35 Joint Strike Fighter jets for around \$3 billion, together with additional funding for missile defense systems that Israel was planning to deploy throughout the country (ibid). The U.S. Congress had approved in early 2010 another package of "\$205 million for Israel's Iron Dome short-range rocket defense system. The money was expected to allow the IDF to buy an additional six batteries for the system" (ibid). But Netanyahu in the end yielded to his cabinet, and not to Obama's plea. A member in the Knesset from Likud, Netanyahu's party, Danny Danon, told thousands of right-wing activists who were counting down the remaining seconds of the settlements moratorium "Tonight, we are returning this decree to the trash bin of history...Starting tomorrow morning, we will resume building". Danon also added that he wanted "to send a message to Obama. We have a lot of respect for the American president and for the American people, but we ask you to respect our democracy and the rights of the Jewish people to build their homes in the Land of Israel" (ibid). President Obama, in his turn, received Danny Danon's "message" to "respect...the rights of the Jewish people to build their homes in the Land of Israel", which meant an end to settlements freeze, and as a consequence an end to the peace process for the foreseeable future.

Now towards the end of 2011 and for almost two years, Obama kept trying, sometimes hard, with Netanyahu, but in vain. Despite all the time, the efforts, and the incentives, the Netanyahu

cabinet wanted to keep building in the territories which were the subject of peace talks and asked that the Palestinians continue peace talks regardless of the settlements issue. This had been possible from 1993 up to the advent of the Obama administration, which sided with the Palestinian request for the first time that settlements in the 1967 occupied territories and peace talks were incompatible, and housing construction therefore had to stop before any negotiations could resume. President Obama had said in 2009 that “construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop” ; and the Palestinians, as previously mentioned, counted on Obama. They could not be more lenient about the settlements issue than the Americans after they had heard both President Obama, his Secretary of State, and his Vice President reiterating time and again that Israel had to stop constructions before any peace talks could restart .

Having been publicly humiliated by Netanyahu, who simply turned down his plea to maintain the settlements moratorium, President Obama was probably awakened to the harsh reality of American politics that as the president of the sole superpower on earth, he had failed, after trying for two years, to pressure Israel into acquiescing to his “advice” regarding a complete or a partial freeze on settlements as a prerequisite to resuming peace talks with the Palestinians. “Wisely, in my view, the administration is bending to reality”, said Robert Malley, a peace negotiator in the Clinton administration . In his annual speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 24, 2010, two days before the end of the settlements moratorium, Obama put his own credibility on the line when he spoke to world leaders, essentially demanding that Israel extend the moratorium. He said: “We believe that the moratorium should be extended. We also believe that talks should press on until completed. Now is the time for the parties to help each other overcome this obstacle...Now is the time for this opportunity to be seized, so that it does not slip away” .

However, five days after President Obama spoke at the United Nations, Prime Minister Netanyahu ignored his request for an additional sixty-day settlement freeze, and the direct talks the president had striven for simply collapsed, resulting not only in disappointment among the Palestinians but also in a strangely dramatic shift in Obama’s perception of the peace process in the Middle East.

In December 2010 the Obama administration decided to end its two-year push for Israel to stop settlement construction as a precondition for negotiations with the Palestinians. The New York Times reported that “after three weeks of fruitless haggling with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the Obama administration has given up its effort to persuade the Israeli government to freeze construction of Jewish settlements” in order to give a chance for the recently brokered direct peace talks to continue . Obama’s star-crossed campaign for three years to live up to his June 2009 Cairo speech pledge to bring about an end to the 60-year old Israeli-Palestinian conflict now foundered on Israel’s door.

Moreover, the Obama administration strategy for and perception of the Middle East conflict would change dramatically by 2011. The first back shift of Obama’s posture was his decision to quit seeking an Israeli settlements curb. It was President Obama who had declared in his famous 2009 Cairo Speech that settlements and peace were incompatible, and therefore Israeli housing construction ought to stop as a precondition for the two parties to resume peace talks. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, a freeze on Israeli settlements had not been a Palestinian precondition to talk to the Israelis. After all, Israeli constructions in the 1967 occupied territories never stopped from the 1993 Oslo Accords up to the 2009 advent of the

Obama administration. By requesting from the beginning of his term in 2009 that Israeli settlements stop before any peace negotiations could restart, Obama simply climbed the peace tree and the Palestinians had little choice but to climb with him. Now, after trying in vain with an intransigent Netanyahu for almost two years, President Obama simply gave up, but justified his failure by Netanyahu's political vulnerability in his ruling coalition. The latter's failure to heed to American peace appeals "revealed a degree of weakness in his coalition", said Daniel C. Kurtzer, a former American ambassador to Israel . Nevertheless, the United States reiterated that it would "continue to protect Israel's security and fight efforts to challenge its legitimacy in international organizations" (ibid).

Indeed, Obama's pledge to "fight efforts to challenge [Israel's] legitimacy in international organizations" was carried out just a couple of months later when the United States vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements in the 1967 occupied territories, adding another veto to the list of America's already 60 vetoes to shield Israel from international pressure or criticism. Despite warnings from Aaron David Miller, a former U.S. negotiator, that the United States ought not to be seen as "Israel's lawyer" by exerting more pressure on the Palestinians than the Israelis, the Obama administration used its first veto in February 2011 to thwart a U.N. resolution denouncing the resumption of Israeli housing constructions in the Palestinian territories, which derailed a series of American attempts to restart the peace process. What was unfortunate for Obama was the fact that the United States stood alone against the other fourteen Security Council members in defending Israel on an issue which ironically President Obama himself had set as a precondition in June 2009 to resuming the peace process, then kept pressuring Netanyahu in vain to extend his settlements moratorium, whose end toppled Washington's September 2010 "last chance" for peace.

On the one hand, President Obama recognized in his Cairo speech of June 4, 2009 that those settlements were "illegitimate" and "must stop" before the peace process could be put back on track. On the other hand, Obama's Representative Susan Rice in the U.N. Security Council not only vetoed a unanimous condemnation by the Council of the Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories, but also defended that action as an attempt to encourage the rivals in the Middle East to resume peace talks. Rice rather oddly explained that Washington's "opposition to the resolution...should not be misunderstood to mean we support settlement activity...On the contrary, we reject in the strongest terms the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlement activity" .

Even America's closest allies in the Security Council distanced themselves from Washington's controversial and contradictory February 2011 veto. Britain, France and Germany issued a joint statement in which they explained why they supported the U.N. resolution condemning recent Israeli settlement activities, and took a different stance from that of the United States. The European statement read: "because our views on settlements, including East Jerusalem, are clear: they are illegal under international law, an obstacle to peace, and constitute a threat to a two-state solution. All settlement activity, including in East Jerusalem, should cease immediately" (UK Mission to the United Nations, February 22, 2011). A European Troika statement further isolated the Obama administration which "risked the appearance of weakness in its approach to the search for Middle East peace and set it on a contradictory course to its earlier tough language against the settlements" (*italics added*) .

The United States February veto was a contradiction with what had been called Obama's approach to the conflict; an approach that was expressed in a series of his major speeches and

remarks, mainly in Cairo and Turkey in 2009, and in the U.N. General Assembly both in 2009 and 2010. Obama's first veto not only highlighted a congenital procrastination in his perception of the conflict but also shed doubts about America's neutrality as a peace broker. As a matter of fact, "by the end of 2009, Obama had finished introducing himself to the world, and The era of the heraldic oration delivered to euphoric crowds had largely come to an end" (Traub, Foreign Policy, February 2015).

The Palestinians were particularly angered by the Obama administration's veto, since they believed it was Obama who had made the settlements an issue in the first place. "It was Obama who suggested a full settlement freeze", Abbas told Newsweek . Wondering about what may have happened to the President Obama who had supported the Palestinian cause more than any of his predecessors, Abbas added "we both went up the tree. After that, he came down with a ladder and he removed the ladder and said to me, jump. Three times he did it" (ibid).

Actually, as early as January 2010 Obama gave an interview to Time magazine in which he conceded that he had "overestimated [the US] ability" to persuade both sides to make painful concessions, and that he "might not have raised expectations as high", had he understood the intractability of the situation. Ironically, as late as 2011, President Abbas was still citing Obama's 2009 U.N. address as inspiration, calling it the "Obama promise" and saying: "if he said it, he must have meant it" . But did Obama really mean what he had said?

As a matter of fact, Obama's failure was due to the discrepancy between Obama's euphoric tone and the political tools he had at his disposal. Ben Rhodes, Obama's speechwriter said that the United States "came in surfing [a] wave of expectations.... [but] also came in with enormous resource constraints staring us in the face. If we had come in a different era, you could have seen him announcing some incredibly ambitious development initiative. We tried with what we have" (Traub, Foreign Policy, February 2015). After all, Obama's National Security Council (NSC) could only approve the classified directive outlining the modest initiatives promised in Cairo two years after the speech, which shows that even the President's house was indeed divided against itself regarding Obama's Cairo wild goose chase.

In addition to the dichotomy between Obama's rhetoric and legacy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there are also serious questions about whether President Obama from the offset had an approach in the first place. Daniel Levy, a former adviser to an earlier Israeli prime minister said that "People don't think there's an Obama-specific approach...You're seeing a very similar approach to what we've seen in the past – an approach that didn't deliver" . Levy added that "the script for now is still being written more by the Netanyahu government than the Obama administration" (ibid). Within the span of two years from 2009 to 2011, President Obama gradually softened his rhetoric about the issue of the Israeli settlements from the position that "America does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements" to America seeking peace just in "Israel's interest" for demographic and security considerations. We saw President Obama gradually backing down on his initial position regarding Israeli settlements till he reached the point of vetoing a U.N. Security Council resolution on the settlements issue in 2011 while he himself had requested in 2009 that Israel stop those settlements before peace talks could resume.

It was as early as 2010 when President Obama started stepping back from his initial position with respect to the settlements issue. He then stated that "Israel's settlement moratorium ha[d] made a difference on the ground and improved the atmosphere for talks". The following year,

Obama was no longer talking about settlements nor about the peace prospects, but he came to the United Nations and talked in a defeatist and resigned tone. He later said on September 21, 2011 that "Peace is hard work...expectations have gone unmet. Israeli settlement activity continues. Palestinians have walked away from talks". This sounded like balancing the two sides' responsibility for the stalled peace process without stating clearly who rejected most peace suggestions. President Obama had already moved from an "America [that] will not turn its back on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own" in June 2009 to a different political discourse in May 2011 before AIPAC when he declared that "for the Palestinians, efforts to delegitimize Israel will end in failure. Symbolic actions to isolate Israel at the United Nations in September won't create an independent state" .

Although this work is not about the myriad of Israel lobbies in the United States and their influence on Washington's perception of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as previously mentioned in the introduction, it is worth noting that President Obama found it difficult to persuade a historically pro-Israel Congress to "forgive" the Palestinians for their September 2011 United Nations bid. Ironically, the Obama administration turned to Israel to solicit the help of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in urging members of Congress not to block the 50 million dollars in aid to the Palestinian Authority . Although the U.S. Congress eventually bent to Israel's "pressure" and authorized funds to the Palestinians, it reminded the Palestinian Authority that it would still use the power of the purse if it continued its pursuit of U.N. membership. The other irony here was that the State Department managed to persuade Netanyahu to intervene with Congress by arguing that blocking Palestinian aid could jeopardize Palestinian police training, which could ultimately have serious consequences on Israeli security.

Furthermore, in Obama's three U.N. speeches of 2009, 2010 and 2011 one can notice a consistent reference to Israeli and Palestinian children, whom he said had the right to live in peace, but he kept inconsistently shifting from Israeli girls and Palestinian boys and vice versa. In his U.N. speech 2009, President Obama said that "We must remember that the greatest price of this conflict is not paid by us. It's not paid by politicians. It's paid by the Israeli girl in Sderot who closes her eyes in fear that a rocket will take her life in the middle of the night. It's paid for by the Palestinian boy in Gaza who has no clean water and no country to call his own. These are all God's children". In September 2010, President Obama said before the U.N. General Assembly that "this time, we will think not of ourselves, but of the young girl in Gaza who wants to have no ceiling on her dreams, or the young boy in Sderot who wants to sleep without the nightmare of rocket fire". In this case, he simply reversed the gender of the Israeli and Palestinian children, but kept the same image of a young Israeli victim scared to death by a probable Palestinian "rocket" at night. In both references to Israeli and Palestinian children, Obama used the term "rocket" but "in the middle of the night" in the first speech, and "sleep without the nightmare" in the second speech. In short, he kept the same context not only of alleged Palestinian terror but also of the dark in order to maximize sympathy with a frightened Israeli child, as dark for children usually evokes more fear than daytime does.

In his 2011 U.N. speech, which was welcomed by almost all major American Jewish organizations and media as his most pro-Israeli yet, President Obama came back with yet another reference to children, though this time he mentioned neither cities nor sexes; instead he talked about "Israeli and Palestinian children" in general. He said: "The measure of our actions must always be whether they advance the right of Israeli and Palestinian children to live lives of peace and security and dignity and opportunity" . This generalization could only reflect the sense of vagueness and even confusion about the situation in the Middle East. In

talking about “the right of Israeli and Palestinian children to live lives of peace”, instead of drawing the bleak picture of an Israeli child frightened by a Palestinian rocket in the dark, Obama came a bit closer to balancing the two sides, instead of referring to an Israeli victim versus a Palestinian demanding “clean water”.

What is common, however, in all the three speeches, was that President Obama failed to offer any tangible results that would have changed the lives of those Israeli and Palestinian children he said he was more worried about than about politics. President Obama could only offer a further stalemate in the peace process, an attractive political discourse but without real change, an American veto in February 2011 on a Security Council resolution condemning Israel’s rejection of all pleas, including American ones, to extend its settlements moratorium in September 2010, and eventually a promise to veto any Palestinian bid for statehood in the United Nations or any other effort that would undermine Israel’s legitimacy. “We will stand against attempts to single it out for criticism in international forums”, President Obama promised in a May 2011 Middle East Speech in the Department of State’s Dean Acheson Room.

The gradual shift in Obama’s political discourse in his three U.N. General Assembly speeches in 2009, 2010 and 2011 testify to his awakening to the complexity of Washington’s politics that however sympathetic he may be to the Palestinian cause, if ever he was, he had little to offer to them, simply because America’s foreign policy in the Middle East is shaped by variables other than the President’s personal wish. Obama’s failure to live up to his 2009 promises to the Muslim world and his successive policy contradictions in dealing with the Israelis and Palestinians reveal his political impotence. President Obama, the president of the sole superpower on earth, unwittingly showed that he had little leverage to persuade Israel, a tiny country whose security and economic well being largely depends on American subsidies and interest-free loans, to extend its freeze on settlement growth for just sixty days. As Peter Beinart from the City University of New York and The Daily Beast columnist put it “It was, by any historical standard, a remarkable turn of events—a prime minister of Israel demonstrating a willingness to humiliate a U.S. president—and demonstrating also his ability to do so with the full-throated complicity of the U.S. Congress”.

Faced with “scathing attacks by Republican presidential rivals for supposedly abandoning Israel”, President Obama had now to make the necessary “readjustments” to save his reelection chances in 2012. With presidential elections drawing nearer, caution on the Israel-Palestine issue became a traditional survival strategy, in view of Obama’s economic woes, which may explain the shift in President Obama’s tone. Former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, Obama’s main Republican rival for the 2012 presidential elections, kept repeating his much-quoted line--“it is the culmination of President Obama’s repeated efforts over three years to throw Israel under the bus”. Another Republican presidential frontrunner, Texas Governor Rick Perry, characterized “the Obama policy in the Middle East [as] naive, arrogant, misguided and dangerous” (ibid).

As the 2012 presidential elections loomed nearer and nearer, President Obama started working early enough to regain American Jewish support; the short cut was the AIPAC annual forum. AIPAC meets every year towards the middle of spring, which offers a chance for political contenders in the United States to try to win a short time span to give a speech reiterating the classical discourse of the United States-Israel ironclad relationship. President Obama was not an exception at the AIPAC May 2011 forum. Jennifer Laslo Mizrahi, President of The Israel Project, a pro-Israel public affairs group, said that Obama had told the people in the room what

they wanted to hear. He told the audience that "we reaffirmed that fundamental truth that has guided our presidents and prime ministers for more than 60 years — that even while we may at times disagree, as friends sometimes will, the bonds between the United States and Israel are unbreakable — (applause)". Indeed, "Israel is as much a part of American values and traditions as are hot dogs, apple pie and freedom", as Mizrahi put it.

At the beginning of his term, President Obama took it upon himself that his administration would be judged by its actions and not its words regarding the Palestinian problem, which had bedeviled eleven American presidents before him. The time was then for deeds and not for words. Now, judging Obama's record with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by the same token, it seems that he said what he did not mean, as substantial change has been hard to achieve in view of the stalemate in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that has grinded on for more than 63 years now. In short, for the Arab-Israeli conflict, one can see striking similarities between Obama's approach and legacy to those of his predecessor, leading the discussion back to what this paper hypothesized at the beginning, that Obama's new political discourse towards the Middle East has been just a cosmetic "change" of tone rather than a substantive change of strategy.

Moreover, a quick scanning of Obama's new lexicon would show that he simply substituted new terms for Bush's old ones. He has tried to embellish old tactics, and using a new political discourse, thereby distancing himself from Bush's controversial tone and style. As a matter of fact, the change in Obama's political discourse and the copious promises of changing the tone and style of America's dealing with the Middle East are overshadowed by the failure to see those promises materialize on the ground. "What had changed since 2009 was [that] Obama himself seemed to have lost faith in the efficacy of oratory. A speech is a transaction between orator and listener; some crucial energy had dissipated from both sides of that transaction. Obama's words no longer carry a charge. It is hard to recapture, even to remember, the sense of excitement he once generated" (Traub, *Foreign Policy*, February 2015).

As Obama's initial change in tone has not reflected any change of strategy, it transpires that America's interests do not change with successive presidents, no matter who is in the White House. It seems that the Obama administration has been caught in that familiar trap between rhetoric and policy options. Regardless of what President Obama has said or will say tomorrow, Washington's policy options with respect to the Palestinian problem will likely confront the constraints of America's domestic politics that have been conducted on two basic variables—the distributions of foreign policy prerogatives among the executive and the legislative, and the susceptibility of the latter to the influence of pressure groups and lobbies. So, why expect President Obama to make good on promises when it is obvious he cannot?

The main purpose of this work, therefore, has been to explore the hypothesis that Obama's new reconciliatory political discourse toward the Middle East at the beginning of his term in 2009 was just a change of tactic and tone rather than a change of strategy. It has taken the issue of the Israeli settlements in the 1967 Palestinian territories as a case study.

The findings of this work can be summed up in the selection of these three quotations from President Obama's three United Nations speeches in 2009, 2010 and 2011. He said on September 23, 2009: "We continue to emphasize that America does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements". One year later, Obama softened his tone over that issue. He said: "Israel's settlement moratorium has made a difference on the ground and improved the atmosphere for talks". In his 2011 speech, however, President Obama went to the United

Nations with this: “peace is hard work. If it were that easy, it would have been accomplished by now”. He also warned the Palestinians threatening a U.N. membership application that “peace will not come through statements and resolutions at the United Nations”. These quotations have shown the paradoxically gradual change in Obama’s tone and rhetoric in dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict over the last three years. He started in 2009 with unprecedentedly strong rhetoric about Israel’s “obligation” to stop settlements for peace talks to resume, but he kept softening his tone with Israel and hardening it towards the Palestinians till he ended in 2011 with reiterating the American-Israeli “unshakeable” bond, and warning the Palestinians not to seek United Nations membership in reaction to the U.S. failure to put the peace process back on track.

This paper has argued that Obama’s philosophy in pursuing peace in the Middle East, like that of his predecessors, stemmed from the premise that peace was in Israel’s interest. This posture could explain why the United States, from Henry Kissinger in the 1970s to John Kerry today, has tried to broker peace in the region. Obama did substantiate this point when he said before AIPAC in May 2011 that the United States had tried to mediate peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians; he said that it is precisely because of the U.S. “commitment to Israel’s long-term security that we have worked to advance peace between Israelis and Palestinians” . By then President Obama had already conceded most of what Netanyahu could have asked for. He no longer offered any criticism of new Israeli settlements, as he had done in Cairo two years before. He no longer talked about “the 194th new member state of the United Nations”—the Palestinian State (Obama’s Speech at the U.N. on September 23, 2010). Ironically, he was now warning the Palestinians against going forward with their U.N. bid, which raises the question about to whom President Obama addressed his January 2009 pledge that “ultimately, people are going to judge [him] not by [his] words but by [his] actions and [his] administration’s actions” . Finally, as James Traub, the Foreign Policy contributor, put it “in the end, [Obama’s] failure to move the world as he hoped to is our tragedy, far more than it is his”.

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timetable about how to move Israelis and Palestinians over three years to the creation of a Palestinian state that should exist in peace with Israel. Although the Palestinians and Israelis accepted the basic outlines of the plan shortly after it was formally introduced in June 2003, none of its provisions has been fully observed, and the two-state solution is still elusive.

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APPENDIX

