

# UNREQUITED HOPE: OBAMA AND PALESTINE

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**Abstract:** The early hope that the two-state solution would be implemented during the Obama presidency faded as both the Mitchell and Kerry negotiations failed. Only during his final weeks in office did Obama agree to the US abstaining on a UN vote condemning the ongoing Israeli settlements in territory earmarked as part of a future Palestinian state. After he leaves the presidency, there is a slim chance that Obama might join Jimmy Carter in working to mobilize American voters and taxpayers around efforts by Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) and other movements to oppose pro-Zionist lobbies, especially American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and to force Congress and the President to pressure Israel to withdraw from the Occupied Territories and enable the creation of a de-militarized Palestinian state.

**Keywords:** Palestine, Barack Obama, Israel, settlements, Zionist lobby

America's strong bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable. ... On the other hand, it is also undeniable that the Palestinian people—Muslims and Christians—have suffered in pursuit of a homeland. ... The only resolution is for the aspirations of both sides to be met through two states, where Israelis and Palestinians each live in peace and security. ... Palestinians must abandon violence. Resistance through violence and killing is wrong. ... The Palestinian Authority must develop its capacity to govern, with institutions that serve the needs of its people. ... Israelis must acknowledge that just as Israel's right to exist cannot be denied, neither can Palestine's. ... And finally, the Arab states must recognize that the Arab Peace initiative was an important beginning, but not the end of their responsibilities<sup>1</sup>

President Barack Obama's much quoted speech, given at Cairo University early in his first term, offered some hope that, after more than 50 years of conflict, the United States might serve as a truly neutral mediator to achieve statehood for the Palestinians and an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict. With the sole exception of Jimmy Carter, who after taking office, and in the years since leaving Washington, has become highly knowledgeable about the conflict and who speaks more forcefully about the need and justice of a Palestinian state than any other past US president, Barack Obama arguably knew more about the complex history of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the plight of the Palestinians than any candidate to enter

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the White House. Obama's unique childhood had given him experience in living outside the United States and, over the years, he had enjoyed the company of a wide variety of friends from different religious and national backgrounds. While an undergraduate at Occidental College, Obama studied the Arab-Israeli conflict and argued for the inclusion of the Palestinians directly in the peace process.<sup>2</sup> Hence, after Obama's election and his outreach to the Arab world, as evidenced by the extremely well-received Cairo speech, Palestinians and their supporters were cautiously optimistic.

## **Failed Negotiations**

In the eight years since, these hopes have been dashed. They died because of the political intransigence of the Binyamin (Bibi) Netanyahu administration in Israel and political realities in the United States. But in the heady first week of Obama's presidency, hopes were high. As one of his first actions in office, Obama called Mahmud Abbas, as well as Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and King Abdullah of Jordan, to emphasize his commitment to the peace process.<sup>3</sup> To jump-start the stalled peace process, Obama, on only his second day in office, appointed George Mitchell as Special Middle East envoy. Mitchell, an Arab American, had extensive experience in the region; during the George W. Bush presidency, Mitchell authored a special report calling for a freeze of Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories. The details of Mitchell's and, later, John Kerry's failed attempts to mediate an overall peace agreement have been described in numerous accounts—some more pro-Israeli and others more pro-Palestinian<sup>4</sup>—hence, a short summary of actions taken during his first years in office will suffice, before Obama's actions dealing with the conflict in the last weeks of his presidency are described in some detail.

In 2009, newly appointed Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton announced that until Hamas recognized Israel's existence it would not be included in future negotiations, while Mitchell emphasized that the United States planned to include the 2002 Arab League peace initiative as an integral part of future negotiations. The Arab Peace Plan, proposed by Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, who later acceded to the throne, was presented and adopted by the Arab League Summit in Beirut in the spring 2002, during the George W. Bush administration. In short, the Plan proposed that all the Arab states were prepared to recognize Israel and end hostilities, dependent on a full Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories, while reaffirming Arab commitment to the land for peace principle. This left the door open for further negotiations as to exact territorial withdrawals and presented a remarkable softening of positions, as well as an opportunity for a comprehensive regional peace agreement. However, the Plan sank like a rock when both Israel,

under hard-liner Ariel Sharon, and the Bush administration, either ignored or rejected the offer and failed to follow up on any of its initiatives.

Mitchell's inclusion of the moribund Arab peace initiative, which had been reaffirmed at the Arab League Summit in 2007,<sup>5</sup> was an effort to revive the process for a comprehensive regional peace. In the following two years, Mitchell made nine visits to the region in attempts to achieve some sort of peace agreement between the two sides.<sup>6</sup> Mitchell made clear that the ongoing establishment of Israeli settlements in West Bank territories that had been earmarked as part of the future Palestinian state was a major obstacle to any peace settlement. In late 2009, Prime Minister Netanyahu, who presided over a rancorous coalition government, and who depended on far right allies to stay in power, announced a freeze over new settlements. Notably, the "freeze" did not apply to 3,000 housing units, schools, and other public buildings under construction, or, crucially, to Jerusalem. On the other hand, President Obama subsequently tried, in a protracted telephone conversation, to persuade Abbas not to work for a UN condemnation of the settlements. Understandably, since to have done so would have destroyed the last vestige of his credibility, Abbas rebuffed the presidential entreaties.<sup>7</sup>

In early 2010, Mitchell emphasized that discussions should aim for political and security agreements, as well as for Palestinian economic growth and that such negotiations should take no more than two years. But when the time limit expired in September 2010, even the partial moratorium of settlements was not extended. Predictably, the Palestinians refused to continue talks until the settlement freeze was reinstated. Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton both tried to revive the talks but failed, while Hamas and Hizbollah threatened to resume violent attacks against Israel. Although Mitchell and later Kerry continued to work for the peace process, it appears that even during his first term in office, Obama concluded that it was largely futile to expend political capital on the implementation of a meaningful two-state solution—that was unlikely to succeed—and turned his energies toward domestic programs that had more chance of success.

The following six years were punctuated with sporadic negotiations, shuttle diplomacy, Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians, as well as Israeli bombardments and attacks on Gaza and ongoing settlement construction in areas previously earmarked for the Palestinian state. Not surprisingly, no final agreements were reached and both sides blamed the other. As early as 2011, Netanyahu had publicly rebuked Obama on restarting peace process, while characterizing Hamas as the Palestinian version of al-Qaeda 2011.

Netanyahu's far right allies in government were firmly and publicly committed to holding all the occupied territories as part of a Jewish state. For many years, Netanyahu had strenuously rejected a two-state solution and to many—both in Israel and the Occupied Territories—his tepid acceptance of a two-state solution

appeared to be predicated more on political expediency than on any personal commitment or belief.

Hard-liner Avigdor Lieberman's appointment as Israel's foreign minister and the continued split between Hamas, in control of Gaza, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) under Mahmud Abbas in the West Bank, further contributed to the ongoing distrust of the Israelis toward the Palestinians and vice versa. It remained difficult, if not impossible, for either side to trust the other or for either to adopt flexible policies that any workable, viable peace settlement required.

In 2013, the new Secretary of State, John Kerry, attempted to revive the peace process and Martin Indyk, from the Brookings Institution and a former US ambassador to Israel, was appointed as a Special Envoy to lead the negotiations. A new time frame was established with the aim of securing a settlement in 2014. During these negotiations, Kerry met with Palestinian and Israeli leaders dozens of times, but, again, no real progress was achieved. After Israel accepted plans for over a thousand new settler homes in January 2014, the negotiations were doomed. Hence, the April 2014 deadline came and went and the negotiations ended without any agreements. A clearly exasperated Indyk declared that members of Netanyahu's coalition government undercut their Prime Minister to stonewall negotiations. Some voiced fears that Israel was in danger of becoming an apartheid state.<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis even stepped in by recognizing the state of Palestine and inviting both Israelis and Palestinians to a prayer summit. Predictably, both sides blamed the other for the failure to reach a final agreement. After a new Palestinian Unity Government of the PLO and Hamas was announced in June 2014, even negotiations over resuming talks ended.

In the fall of 2014, Abbas submitted new proposals to Kerry calling for direct talks of nine months, a three-year plan for Israeli withdrawals and a freeze on settlements. Jordan also submitted a plan to the UN Security Council that called for a freeze on settlements and a release of prisoners.

Spurred by the formation of the Palestine Unity Government, Israel sought, unsuccessfully, to destroy Hamas once and for all in a bloody Israel-Gaza war in June 2014. Although the war failed to destroy Hamas, it wrecked further havoc in the already devastated Gaza, causing further deaths and devastation. Plans for further seizures of land in the West Bank, as well as incursions and provocations at Haram al Sharif (Temple Mount), compounded suspicions and mutual recriminations. Netanyahu's support for a two-state solution was tepid at best, while his major allies on the far right of the political spectrum were fervently opposed to ceding any West Bank territory, or as it was called among Israeli hard-liners, Judea and Samaria. Differences between Hamas and the PLO, under Abbas, further weakened the Palestinians and their ability to negotiate a workable compromise. The two parties often worked at cross-purposes from one another, making it far easier for Israel to

claim there was no reliable partner with whom to negotiate. Thus, it came as no surprise when the mediation efforts of both Mitchell and Kerry failed.

Domestic political considerations in the United States also played a role in the failure of the negotiations. With another run for the presidency in her future, Clinton was clearly eager to maintain cordial relations with pro-Zionist supporters in the United States, many of whom were fervent Democrats and allies on domestic issues, as well as major financial contributors to the Democratic Party. Mitchell also had opponents within the administration, notably Dennis Ross. Ross dealt with Middle East issues in both the G.H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations. After leaving the State Department, Ross worked for the pro-Israeli Washington Institute for Near East Policy and helped to write Obama's 2008 speech to American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Hillary Clinton recommended Ross be brought into Obama's administration where, in June 2009, he was appointed Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for the Central Region that included the Middle East, Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and South Asia. Ross frequently worked at cross-purposes with Mitchell.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Ross stumped for Clinton and encouraged pro-Zionist groups to support her financially and politically. By 2016, Ross dropped all pretense of neutrality, bluntly telling an audience at a New York City synagogue, "We need to be advocates for Israel."<sup>9</sup> Ross also alleged that Obama, "looks at Palestinians as being weak [and] too weak to criticize."<sup>10</sup> Hence, according to Ross, Obama, not Netanyahu, was to blame for the failure of the negotiations. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Ross praised both Clintons, arguing that Hillary would avoid "Obama-esque spats with Israel."<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, Aaron Miller and other State Department officials who had also been involved in Arab-Israeli negotiations criticized Ross's pro-Israeli stance. Refuting Ross's criticism of Obama's alleged hostility to Israel, Miller argued, "For far too long, many American officials involved in Arab-Israeli peacemaking, myself included, have acted as Israel's attorney, catering and coordinating with the Israelis at the expense of successful peace negotiations."<sup>12</sup>

But, as a matter of political expediency, Obama backtracked when asked about the Arab-Israeli negotiations, remarking that:

I think that we overestimated our ability to persuade them to do so when their politics run contrary ... (I)f we had anticipated some of these problems ... earlier, we might not have raised expectations as high.<sup>13</sup>

As it became evident that no real progress could be made to resolve the conflict, the Obama administration, while continuing to pay lip service to negotiations, shifted gears to devote its energies to domestic programs, waging a bitter fight to

secure the Affordable Health Care, that was opposed at every turn by an obstreperous Grand Old Party/The Republican Party (GOP)-led Congress. In foreign affairs, Afghanistan and Iraq took precedence. Israeli-Palestinian issues took a back seat, to extent that, for example, the conflict was not even mentioned in Bob Woodward's *Obama's Wars*.<sup>14</sup>

The majority in Congress openly took Netanyahu's side over that of their own president. Netanyahu's 2011 appearance before Congress might well be described as a "love-in," with the Israeli Prime Minister receiving 29 standing ovations in contrast to Obama's 25 ovations for the 2011 State of Union address.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, the sole voluble protest to Netanyahu's speech was from a Jewish American in the audience.<sup>16</sup> Before Congress, Netanyahu asserted Israel's right to settle in Judea and Samaria, thereby clearly indicating his refusal to negotiate any sort of meaningful Palestinian state in West Bank.

In a shocking breach of protocol in 2015, John Boehner, Speaker of the House, invited Netanyahu to address a joint session of Congress and Senate without asking the President. In this speech, Netanyahu railed against the Iran nuclear deal while, not surprisingly, neglecting to mention Israel's own nuclear arsenal. Although a few politicians skipped Netanyahu's speech, the majority again gave the Israeli Prime Minister a rousing welcome marked with numerous ovations.

As President, Obama met with Netanyahu for the last time in the fall 2016. Tellingly, the two leaders met, not at the White House, but in a New York hotel, where their mutual distain was evident.<sup>17</sup> Netanyahu's bitterness over the Iran deal was even more pronounced than his anger over Obama's attempted rapprochement with the Palestinians. In fact, Netanyahu had little need to belabor the Palestinian issue since he had essentially secured what he wanted when, in September 2016, the United States agreed to sign a ten-year Memorandum of Understanding providing Israel with a \$38 billion security aid package. Obama emphasized that the deal demonstrated the "unbreakable bond" between the two nations. But some Netanyahu far-right political rivals in Israel grumbled that even this enormous gift was not enough and that it should have been \$45 billion.

Netanyahu and his allies recognized that there was no need for further negotiations regarding Palestine, as talks were a political non-starter in the United States, particularly in a presidential election year. Consequently, Israel, with the support of pro-Zionist allies in the United States, was free to concentrate on killing the Iran deal.

By 2016, Obama only gingerly referred to continued Jewish settlements in the West Bank, whereas, at least behind closed doors, he had initially demanded a halt to settlements. In fact, Clinton and her supporters successfully demanded that the issue of settlements and occupation not even be mentioned in the 2016 Democratic party platform.<sup>18</sup> By this time, Obama had essentially admitted that there was no use expending political capital on the Arab-Israeli issue. His criticism of Israel

was also muted because he wanted Clinton to win in what devolved into a brutal presidential campaign. The lost opportunities did not go unnoticed in the Arab world. Under Obama's presidency, the settler population in the occupied territories increased, while the emergence of a viable Palestinian state became less likely.<sup>19</sup>

## UN Resolution 2334

By the summer of 2016, with the contentious presidential campaign in full swing, the possibility of the United Nations attempting to pass resolutions supporting a Palestinian State—something Abbas had long pushed for—became a vexing issue for US politicians. As early as the previous summer, Obama had raised the possibility of allowing a United Nations vote on Palestinian statehood. Again, domestic political considerations seemed to override international issues. Thus, when visiting a Washington synagogue, Obama emphasized his commitment to Israel and his allies, especially his old friend and adviser, David Axelrod, reaffirmed the President's commitment to Israel.<sup>20</sup>

Many Israelis and Jewish American supporters worried over Israel's shift toward the right and the possibility that it might abandon the two-state solution altogether and thereby become either an apartheid state or a non-Jewish one. In light of these potential dangers, a number of Chiefs of State from the Israeli Defense forces, Directors from Shin Bet (Israel's domestic security agency), and five former heads of Mossad (Israel's intelligence agency) called for a two-state solution in a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* in July 2016.<sup>21</sup> The ad quoted former Prime Minister and former Chief of State of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Ehud Barak emphasizing that "A two-state solution is the only viable long-term solution. It is a compelling imperative for us ... and our future as a Jewish and democratic state; it's not a favor for the Palestinians."<sup>22</sup> Other well-known and respected military and intelligence leaders echoed Barak's injunctions. J Street, the Washington-based Jewish, Zionist lobby that sought to counter right-wing forces, weighed into the debate advocating that the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) should cancel tax-exempt status for charities that supported settlements.

In November, Jimmy Carter's strongly worded editorial in *The New York Times* urged that the United States recognize Palestine, warning that, "38 years after Camp David, the commitment to peace is in danger of abrogation."<sup>23</sup> Carter went on to emphasize that "Israel is building more and more settlements ... and entrenching its occupation of Palestinian lands ... This process is hastening a one-state reality that could destroy Israeli democracy."<sup>24</sup>

Although Obama was unlikely to make any major announcements regarding Palestine, or resolutions pending in the United Nations, until after the November



elections, pundits openly debated what moves he might make after the votes were in. After Zionist lobbyists expressed their concerns, 88 senators issued a public letter urging Obama to veto any anti-Israel resolutions in the United Nations.<sup>25</sup>

By the fall 2016, Palestinians were considering submitting resolutions to condemn the settlements and for the recognition of Palestine as a state to the United Nations. The PLO had long lobbied for UN recognition of Palestine as a state, something 138 nations had already done. After some discussion, Egypt, as the only Arab member on the Security Council, was selected to submit a resolution calling for the cessation of Israeli settlements, emphasizing that existing settlements had no legal validity and were violations of international law. Egypt circulated a draft resolution on December 21. Following exhortations from the White House, the resolution was reworded indirectly to rebuke Hamas and other groups that engaged in terrorist acts, calling for a cessation of “acts of violence against civilians, including acts of terror.”<sup>26</sup> These issues led to an incredible week of diplomatic maneuvering and behind the scenes machinations. Egypt circulated a draft resolution Wednesday, December 21, calling for a halt to all Israeli settlements, emphasizing that existing settlements had no legal validity and were violations of international law. Upon urging from the White House, the resolution was reworded to indirectly rebuke Hamas and other groups who engaged in terrorist acts, calling for a cessation of “acts of violence against civilians, including acts of terror.” The Security Council scheduled a vote on the resolution for Thursday, December 22. Late on December 21, President Obama spoke with Kerry, VP Joe Biden, and other advisers, informing them that he was open to abstaining on the resolution. Hearing this news, Israel went into political attack mode. Kerry talked directly with Netanyahu, while Israeli officials approached president elect Trump advisers for support.<sup>27</sup>

Trump had already nominated David M. Friedman as US Ambassador to Israel. Friedman, known for his right-wing, pro-Israeli stances, believed the US embassy should be moved to Jerusalem; he also opposed the two-state solution. Although a president elect does not traditionally become involved in matters of foreign policy prior to being sworn in, Trump weighed into the debate. On Thursday morning, December 22, after discussions with Israelis, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi called Trump, allegedly to discuss peace plans. By Thursday afternoon, Egypt had withdrawn the resolution.

Meanwhile, Great Britain worked quietly behind the scenes to help draw up the final wording of the resolution in order to secure the necessary votes.<sup>28</sup> New Zealand, that had already drawn up a resolution along the same lines, joined by Malaysia, Senegal, and Venezuela, formally submitted the resolution.<sup>29</sup>

After Netanyahu lobbied President Putin to delay or reject the resolution, the Russian ambassador to the United Nations made a half-hearted effort to derail the



resolution by suggesting that a vote be postponed until after Christmas, but he was overruled.<sup>30</sup> When the vote went ahead as planned, Russia, in keeping with its past support for the Palestinians, voted in the affirmative.

On Friday afternoon, December 23, 2016, the Security Council voted on the resolution condemning Israeli settlement building, 14-0 (including Egypt in the affirmative). When the United States abstained, in marked contrast to its many, many previous vetoes of similar resolutions, the resolution passed 14-0 to applause from those in the chamber.<sup>31</sup>

Netanyahu called the US abstention on the resolution, “shameful”<sup>32</sup> and he wasted no time in retaliating, ordering the prompt withdrawal of Israel’s ambassadors to the sponsoring states of New Zealand and Senegal, that also lost its Israeli aid. He also called all the ambassadors from nations that had voted for the resolution into his office to “reprimand”<sup>33</sup> them personally. Netanyahu also—wrongly—blamed Obama for initiating and securing passage of the resolution.

While many members of Congress, pro-Israeli advocates, and Zionist lobby groups lambasted Obama, the vote was actually the first—and only—US vote critical or hostile to Israel cast during his entire presidency. In contrast, during the Reagan administration, the United States cast over 20 votes (either abstentions or condemnations) deemed critical of Israel.<sup>34</sup>

There was little political action or debate over the Christmas holiday,<sup>35</sup> but immediately following the break, on December 28, John Kerry delivered a major, hour-long speech on the Middle East peace process, speaking forthrightly about Obama’s commitment to Israel and the necessity for movement on implementation of a meaningful two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Kerry bluntly stressed that the “two-state solution is now in serious jeopardy,”<sup>36</sup> and went to say:

The status quo is leading towards one state and perpetual occupation.<sup>37</sup>

Kerry criticized both Palestinian use of terrorism and Netanyahu’s right-wing government whose policies, particularly regarding settlements, were leading to the impossibility of a viable two-state solution. Kerry emphasized that:

... if Israel goes down the one state path, it will never have true peace with the rest of the Arab world and I can say that with certainty ... Arab leaders have confirmed their readiness, in the context of Israeli-Palestinian peace, not just to normalize relations but to work openly on securing that peace.<sup>38</sup>

The Secretary explained in some detail the US decision to abstain on the UN resolution condemning Israeli settlements. He also detailed the main principles to

which the United States was committed regarding the conflict; these included providing secure international borders, two states for two peoples, a just solution to the Palestinian refugee issue, resolution for Jerusalem, satisfying Israel's security needs, an end to outstanding claims, and establishing normalized relations and regional security. In conclusion, Kerry—rather bizarrely—quoted former Israeli Prime Minister and President, Shimon Peres, who, on the occasion of the Oslo accords, had crassly remarked:

The original mandate gave the Palestinians 48 percent, now it's down to 22 percent. I think 78 percent is enough for us.<sup>39</sup>

Although 78 percent might have been enough for Peres, many right-wing Israelis and hard-liners in Netanyahu's cabinet currently see the opportunity to incorporate and permanently hold all of historic Palestine. On the other hand, many Israelis and their advocates in the United States fear that this maximalist approach will either lead to the end of a Jewish state or to an apartheid state. Hence, following Kerry's speech, J Street took out a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* with the headline, "Thank You President Obama and Secretary Kerry" in support of the two-state solution. However, many far-right Israelis are content with the status quo and consider the costs of the continued occupation acceptable, especially since a large percentage of the financial burdens are borne or paid for—either directly or indirectly—by the United States. To put US aid to Israel and the Palestine Authority in proportion, it should be borne in mind that, for example, in 2015, US aid to the Palestine Authority totaled \$557 million, a fraction of the \$3 billion given to Israel on an annual basis.

During his last day in office, Obama made one last gesture by signing an executive order releasing \$221 million in humanitarian aid to the Palestine Authority that had been blocked by Congress.<sup>40</sup> Trump immediately announced he would review the decision.

## The Future

As he left the presidency, Obama's legacy regarding the Middle East was a meager one. Although establishing his presidential library will likely be among his first priorities, Obama, if he so chooses, could yet make a meaningful contribution toward the creation of a viable Palestinian state. It is not impossible to imagine movements such as Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS), lobbies such as J Street, Israeli activists such as the documentary group Activestills, and others, in conjunction with Arab states and the Palestinians, enlisting the support of both Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama to coordinate lobby and publicity campaigns to

educate and mobilize American citizens in political efforts to move Congress, state and local governments to make meaningful steps to freeze or cut US aid to Israel until it stops and dismantles settlements in territory earmarked for the Palestinian state. The two former presidents could become the catalysts for changing the course of American politics regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unfortunately, the upheavals and fallout of the Arab Spring have led the Gulf and other Arab states to concentrate more on internal stability than Palestine. Likewise, domestic instability has led Egypt and Jordan to curtail their efforts to exert either military pressure on Israel or political pressure on the United States.

On the positive side, the BDS movement already has widespread support in Europe and elsewhere even in the United States. BDS enjoys considerable momentum on university campuses, with labor unions, churches, other social organizations, and some businesses. Consequently, the foundation for a major nation-wide campaign to stop US support for hard-liner Israeli policies that preclude the establishment of a Palestinian state is already in place.<sup>41</sup> Obama would be an articulate spokesperson helping to secure funding and publicity for a campaign focused on the issue of Palestinian statehood. Of course, blowback from Zionist forces including AIPAC, other Zionist lobby groups and Christian Zionists, is to be expected. A pro-Palestinian campaign—or more appropriately a peace campaign—similar to that launched by Zionist forces against the Arab boycott in the 1970s has the potential to shift American politics regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Such a campaign would include, but not be limited to, a coordinated political blitz against the settlements and for Palestinian statehood, with letter-writing campaigns, personal visits by supporters to local, state, and national politicians, group pressure, advertising campaigns in national and local media, and a “full array of legislative and financial moves to enact laws”<sup>42</sup> impeding support from the United States or private citizens for settlements.

As former presidents, Carter and Obama are uniquely qualified to educate American citizens about the financial and political costs of US support for Israel. Billions of dollars in annual military aid to Israel has enabled the state to redirect resources that might otherwise have been spent on the military to financing, directly and indirectly, the continued blockade of Gaza and occupation of West Bank territory that under the Oslo agreement and subsequent negotiations are earmarked for a Palestinian state. Were American voters aware of the costs and how many of their own tax dollars that go directly, or indirectly, to Israel, public support for Israel would, at the very least, diminish.

Currently, there is little financial burden to the Israeli far right as it seeks to expand settlements in the occupied territories. Rather, American taxpayers bear the brunt of the costs. In the United States, AIPAC and other Zionist groups fear Obama’s involvement even though his administration was one of the friendliest to

Israel in recent history.<sup>43</sup> While president, Obama determined that mediating the Palestinian-Israeli conflict had little chance of success and that, therefore, it was preferable to expand political capital on domestic issues or negotiations over Iranian nuclear capabilities.

As a former president, Obama is no longer limited by the political constraints faced by elected officials. He is, therefore, free—if he so chooses—to devote his considerable energies toward the Palestinian issue. Whether he will take up the challenge remains to be seen.

## Notes

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