

Barack Obama, John Kerry, and the Palestine saga

Avi Shlaim explores whether there was anything Obama could have done to salvage his reputation in the remaining weeks of his lame-duck presidency.



The twilight of Barack Obama's presidency may seem an odd time to propose a new policy initiative for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But, although it is the eleventh hour, it is not too late; it is the last chance to do something constructive and to leave behind a positive legacy.

The beginning of wisdom is to learn from the mistakes of the past. Americans usually prefer to look forward rather than backwards. But as Winston Churchill once observed, the further back you go, the farther forward you can see.

By going back to the beginning of the Obama administration, one cannot help noting the striking disparity between initial promise and ultimate, dismal failure. Reviewing the record helps to identify the causes of failure and it also suggests a last-ditch policy initiative: the sponsoring of a Security Council resolution which lays down the parameters for a two-state solution.

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A cloak for settlement expansion

No American president ever came into office with a better understanding of the tragic history of the Palestinians or a deeper commitment to help them achieve independence than Obama.

In his Cairo speech in April 2009, Obama solemnly pledged to do everything in his power to bring about Palestinian statehood. He correctly identified the expansion of Jewish settlements on the West Bank as the principal obstacle to the emergence of a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Obama confronted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu several times with a demand for a complete settlement freeze and each time the president backed down. By his actions, if not always by his words, Netanyahu demonstrated time and again that he is more interested in land than in peace.

On his second day in office, Obama [appointed](#) Senator George Mitchell, the architect of the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, as his Special Envoy for Middle East Peace. Two years later Mitchell resigned.

A much better alternative would be to couple recognition of Palestine with simultaneous sponsoring of a Security Council resolution which lays down the parameters of a two-state solution. President Trump would be able to tear up bilateral treaties but even he would not have the power to annul a UN resolution. In Northern Ireland, both parties remained committed to the success of the peace process. In the Israel-Palestine context, Netanyahu regarded peace as an American interest, not an Israeli one. He, therefore, turned the American-led peace process into a charade and Mitchell evidently did not want to be part of that charade.

In fact, the so-called peace process was much worse than a charade: it provided the Netanyahu government with a convenient cloak for continuing to pursue its aggressive colonial agenda on the West Bank.

Kerry's efforts

When John Kerry succeeded Hilary Clinton as secretary of state, he threw himself wholeheartedly into the task of peace-making. Whereas Secretary Clinton was noted for her partiality towards Israel, Kerry is meticulously even-handed.

His overarching goal is a settlement that balances justice and independence for the Palestinians with peace and security for the Israelis. Kerry is an admirable American statesman in the George Ball tradition of "How to save Israel in spite of herself". He believes that Israel has no future as a democratic country unless it ends the occupation and resolves peacefully its conflict with the Palestinians.

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In office, Kerry demonstrated the courage of his convictions and he displayed astonishing energy in pursuit of a breakthrough. In his first year as secretary of state, he paid no less than eleven visits to the region.

Yet, the seriousness he brought to the task won him no accolades from his Israeli counterparts. Moshe Yaalon, the defence minister at the time, [accused Kerry](#) of operating from "an incomprehensible obsession and a sense of messianism".

Yaalon and the rest of Netanyahu's hawk-infested cabinet ensured that Kerry failed in his mission by refusing two things that are indispensable for success: a complete settlement freeze and agreement to a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders (with the possibility of land swaps).

The special relationship that isn't Israel did not have to pay any price for its defiance. The special relationship is a one-way street. The US gives Israel money, arms, and advice. Israel takes the money, it takes the arms, and it rejects the advice.

It is the unconditional nature of American support that makes it possible for Israel to persist in its defiance and intransigence. Because of his well-known antipathy towards Netanyahu, Obama is sometimes seen as being anti-Israeli. Nothing could be further from the truth. Obama [has gifted](#) to Israel more money and arms than any of his predecessors, culminating in an aid package of \$38bn for the decade 2018-2028.

Is there anything Obama can do to salvage his reputation in the remaining weeks of his lame-duck presidency? In an article in the New York Times on 28 November, Jimmy Carter urged Obama to recognise Palestine as a state. This would undoubtedly be a positive step, but recognition can be revoked when Donald Trump enters the White House.

A much better alternative would be to couple recognition of Palestine with simultaneous sponsoring of a Security Council resolution which lays down the parameters of a two-state solution. President Trump would be able to tear up bilateral treaties but even he would not have the power to annul a UN resolution.

The case for a US-sponsored Security Council resolution is compelling. Security Council resolution 242 of November 1967 has served as the basis of Israel's peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan. But it only refers to the Palestinians as a refugee problem, not as a people with the right to national self-determination.

UN resolution 181 of 29 November 1947 called for the partition of Palestine into two states, one Arab, one Jewish. This resolution needed to be updated. The basic need now is for the equivalent of 242 for Israel-Palestine: a resolution that condemns all Israeli settlement activity and mandates the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the Gaza Strip and the West Bank with a capital in Jerusalem.

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Egypt prepared a resolution along these lines but strong arm-twisting by Trump and Netanyahu made them [withdraw it](#).

Four other members of the Security Council re-tabled the resolution and [it was passed](#) on December 23 2016, by 14 votes in favour and one abstention. The US abstained, thereby enabling this historic resolution to pass.

By resisting all the pressures to veto this resolution, Obama and Kerry showed courage, struck a blow against the occupation, and helped to keep alive the hope for eventual Palestinian statehood.

Whatever Trump and Israel's leaders may think about it, this UNSC resolution will become a signpost on the long journey, a part of international law that is set in stone, and indeed the cornerstone of all future efforts to resolve this tragic conflict.

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