



Occasional Papers

Obama's First 150 Days

Perspectives from an
Arab American Writer

Gregory Orfalea

Center for Contemporary Arab Studies
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service
Georgetown University

©2009



Obama's First 150 Days

Perspectives from an Arab American Writer

Gregory Orfalea

Gregory Orfalea is the author of eight books, the latest of which is *Angeleno Days: An Arab American Writer on Family, Place, and Politics* (University of Arizona Press, 2009), praised by such authors as Richard Rodriguez and James Fallows. He has written the definitive history of Arab Americans (*The Arab Americans: A History*, Interlink Press, 2006) and his writing has won many awards. He has been teaching Arab American literature at Georgetown University.

GREGORY ORFALEA

Center for Contemporary Arab Studies
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service
241 Intercultural Center
Georgetown University
Washington, D.C. 20057-1020
202.687.5793
<http://ccas.georgetown.edu>

©2009 by the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. All rights reserved.

Barack Obama said in the first presidential primary in Iowa in March 2007: "I'm not running to conform to Washington's conventional thinking—I'm running to challenge it... We've had enough of politicians who put power over principle."¹ Such strong words are downright revolutionary considering how business is normally conducted in this country concerning the Israel-Palestine dispute.

Obama's interest in Middle East peace and his pain over its wars seem to have been there from the start, bred in his spirit, ordained by his blood, and smack dab in the reality of his Muslim name—Barack Hussein Obama. It hardly seems possible he could escape it, even if he wanted. Obama's exceptional 1995 book, his autobiographical *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, makes such leanings, particularly towards racial, economic, and political justice, clear, though there are no specific out-and-out debates on the Middle East.

The preface to the new 2004 edition, written just after capturing one of the two U.S. senate seats from Illinois, notes that the memoir was first written in an atmosphere of economic boom and victories for a better world—Mandela's release, the collapse of the Berlin wall. He ends this honorific litany with "the signing of the peace accords in Oslo."² But Obama makes no bones about why he was resurrecting the out-of-print book: the attacks of September 11, 2001, "a world fractured."³ He does not mince words about how personally he took those attacks: "I know, I have seen, the desperation and disorder of the powerless."⁴ It is not just because, as he puts it, "The bombs of Al-Qaeda have marked, with an eerie precision, some of the landscapes of my life—the buildings and roads and faces of Nairobi, Bali, Manhattan."⁵ But more so:

Because the underlying struggle—between worlds of plenty and worlds of want; between the modern and the ancient; between those who embrace our teeming, colliding, irksome diversity, while still insisting on a set of values that binds us together, and those who would seek, under whatever flag or slogan or sacred text, a certainty and simplification that justifies cruelty toward those not like us—is the struggle set forth on a miniature scale in this book.⁶

This is an extraordinary statement; it places Obama at the nexus of the tensions that birthed Al-Qaeda, and it faces him squarely at them. Either this is utter arrogance or a sense of calm destiny amid dread. He warns, "The embrace of fundamentalism and tribe dooms us all."⁷ But there is no mistaking that Obama's ruling imperative for bringing his book back to life, and, to some extent, his climb to the presidency, was an answer to Al-Qaeda—an answer that was not just outrage, as it was for George W. Bush, who blindly lashed out at home and abroad—but rather a perilous understanding. Obama suggests that Al-Qaeda's attack was directly related to the failure of those

“peace accords” in Oslo and the ascension of a lethal vengeance built up over decades. Obama’s take on September 11 couldn’t have been more different from that of George W. Bush; the former knew in his guts and by virtue of his own fractured yet relentlessly loving family upbringing over three continents “how narrow the path is (for the powerless) between humiliation and untrammelled fury.”⁸ For George W. Bush, the only humiliated ones after 9/11 were Americans. But not for Obama; 14 years after its original appearance, the word “humiliation” appears almost as a burn mark in his historic 2009 speech in Cairo. There it refers to Palestinians.

“Obama’s interest in Middle East peace and his pain over its wars seem to have been there from the start, bred in his spirit, ordained by his blood, and smack dab in the reality of his Muslim name—Barack Hussein Obama.”

Elected November 4, 2008, Barack Obama is the nation’s first African-American president, arriving in office only 16 years after the destructive Rodney King race riots in Los Angeles. Obama achieved the best popular vote since the first President Bush in 1988, and he was the first candidate elected president without winning Missouri in half a century (1956). To top off all the “firsts,” his running mate, Joseph Biden, is the first Catholic vice president.

Would Obama be the first to climb that Mt. Everest of peacemaking—between Israelis and Palestinians? Does he have the toughness, the resoluteness, and yes, the physical bravery to do what has to be done to achieve peace in a land strewn with more corpses of “peace processes” than the Baghdad morgue? The peace processes themselves, at least over the past 20 years, haven’t been very peaceful, process-ful, or principled. Too often they have actually stoked the violence.

Perhaps there was a hint in Obama’s visit to the Middle East in the summer of 2008. He tucked a prayer into the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and against tradition someone stole it and revealed it, sparking outrage in Israel. But the prayer revealed much of what Obama could bring to Middle East peacekeeping: “Lord,” it said, “Protect my family and me. Forgive me my sins, and help me guard against pride and despair. Give me the wisdom to do what is right and just. And make me an instrument of your will.”⁹

Obama’s own respect for language—one does not speak apart from action—and the words he himself has put forth, in private or in public, prior- or post-campaign retraction on Palestinian “suffering,” about the power of special interest lobbies to cripple the nation’s well-being, about the public being sick and tired of being lied to by leaders, about the gaps between rich and poor, about the

bankruptcy of our policy in Iraq, and about his special sense of mission as a black man to cross the bridge for Arab and Jew—all of this seemed targeted to lead him to deeply perilous waters, which yet could wash away our national nightmare concerning the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Still, there was plenty of reason for skepticism that the Middle East would be a top priority as Obama ascended to the presidency. First and most pressing was the financial collapse in the United States which had begun in the fall of 2008 and was rippling across the globe. With unemployment and underemployment reaching Great Depression figures, around 17 percent,¹⁰ the grand expectations for an Obama Middle East breakthrough seemed to dissolve in the fog of mortgage-backed securities as worthless as the greed that spawned them.

Too, there was the strange Obama silence over Gaza. After the election, the Israelis sensed—correctly—they had a zone of opportunity in the interregnum between Bush and Obama to crush Gaza yet again. Two days after Christmas, on December 27, 2008, Operation Cast Lead began; that first day of Israeli air strikes alone killed 230 Palestinians, one of the worst single day death tolls in the 60-year conflict (Palestinians began to call it “Black Saturday”). One wondered if there were any buildings left to crush in Gaza; there certainly were people (in three weeks of fighting, around 1,300 Palestinians were killed and 5,300 wounded, versus 13 Israeli dead and 518 wounded), but 4,000 homes were leveled, too.¹¹

About Gaza, David Grossman, Israel’s celebrated novelist and father of a son killed in the Lebanon War of 2006, thought differently. While criticizing Palestinians for knee-jerk violent responses to violence, such as rocket shooting, Grossman asked his own country to “put its sophisticated mechanisms of repression and self-righteousness on hold...maybe then we can understand something deep and fundamental—that our conduct here in this region has, for a long time, been flawed, immoral and unwise.” He pleaded with his fellow Israelis “to talk [to Hamas], because what has taken place in Gaza over the past three weeks places before us in Israel a mirror that reflects a face that would horrify us were we to gaze on it for one moment from the outside, or if we were to see it on another nation.”¹²

Obama did not speak about Gaza, but like Grossman he couldn’t have avoided the thought that unless the belligerent parties talk soon and settle the problem once and for all, we are all falling into a bottomless pit.

Obama’s first official act on his first day in office (January 21, 2009) was to establish new ethical guidelines for more openness in government; that afternoon he and his military advisors set in motion what he had promised in his campaign—America’s withdrawal from Iraq. The very next day he appointed former Maine Senator George Mitchell as head of a mission expressly created to tackle Israeli-Palestinian peace. That same day he also issued orders closing Guantanamo prison and banning the use of torture. Four days later, his first major

one-on-one press interview took place—not with the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*, but rather with *Al-Arabiya*, a satellite Arab television station based in Dubai. It wasn't long before Obama became the greatest multitasker and one-man fire brigade in the White House since Franklin Roosevelt. He simultaneously took on the Wall Street collapse and the collapse of the automobile, insurance, and banking industries. He then sent legislation to the Hill over health insurance and global warming. But earmarking Middle East peace so prominently right out of the chute of his presidency was no accident. It was Job One. By implication, if it could not be achieved, everything else—America's economy, the environment, universal health care—could be lost in a nuclear wind.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trip to the Middle East dovetailed with Mitchell's first exploratory trip, and it wasn't long before she and her president were speaking firmly to the Israelis: the settlements had to be stopped. The president told the new Israeli president Benjamin Netanyahu the same thing to his face when he visited Washington in March 2009. Finally, Obama traveled to Cairo and gave a speech directed squarely to the Muslim world, which at 1.2 billion comprises nearly one-fifth of the earth's population.

II

All of this—the Mitchell Mission, the *Al-Arabiya* interview, closing Guantanamo and banning torture, official timelines for the Iraq withdrawal, the squaring off on settlements, the speech in Cairo—took place in the first 150 days of Obama's presidency. In fact, repudiating Bush's legacy on Iraq, dispatching Mitchell, and specifying that his first press interview be to an Arab network all took place in the president's first week. Nothing like this had ever happened before concerning the Middle East, which, if addressed at all, is usually relegated to the last days of a second term, when peace efforts invariably fail and seem calibrated to fail. And though the initiatives on Israeli-Palestinian matters offered no real policy changes, only the most dyed-in-the-wool cynic could see in them anything but a sea change in attitude and significant table-setting for the final difficult meal. As such, each of Obama's early moves bears some examination and sense of where they could lead.

First, the Mitchell Mission.

Clearly, picking the deeply respected negotiator of some of the thorniest international and domestic problems showed Obama was ready to assign the best to the toughest. Former Senator Mitchell brokered talks between Irish Catholics and Protestants that led to the breakthrough "Good Friday Accord" in Ireland in 1998. In the late 1990s, with somewhat less success, Mitchell led President Clinton's troubleshooting efforts to staunch the blood of rising Israeli-Palestinian violence. Mitchell is also credited with helping the nation and its national pastime—

baseball—clean up its act when he led the grand jury investigation into the use of performance-enhancing drugs in 2006. Mitchell is known as an eminently thoughtful and patient yet firm negotiator who does not flinch from speaking truth to power. His steroids investigations claimed many of baseball's highest paid and best known players were using such drugs, including the New York Yankees' Roger Clemens and the San Francisco Giants' Barry Bonds, arguably the leading pitcher and hitter of their era.

Could he call out Israeli president Benjamin Netanyahu on settlements the way he did Roger Clemens on steroids? Granted, there's more at stake than a game. But this was the man who had settled the Irish troubles, a crisis around twice as long as the ordeal of Palestine.

Mitchell's dual heritage—being the fourth son of a Maine janitor of Irish descent and a Lebanese immigrant mother—has not hurt him. By giving an Arab American the lead role in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking from the second day of his administration, Obama sent a signal to the Arab world of native affinity, sensitivity, and tenacious fair-mindedness. Let it not be forgotten that George Mitchell was a federal judge before his Congressional career. "This is an appointment that sends a message, 'I'm ready to solve this,'" said James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute.¹³ At the same time, Abraham Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'Nai B'rith, seemed to find Mitchell's reputation for fair-mindedness a problem: "He's been meticulously evenhanded. But the fact is, American policy in the Middle East hasn't been evenhanded—it has been supportive of Israel...So I'm concerned. I'm not sure the situation requires that kind of approach in the Middle East."¹⁴

Mitchell was not the only Obama appointee whose public statements and pedigree showed an unusual grasp of the centrality of settling the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. General James Jones was made head of the National Security Council; he did not waste time in saying that tackling the question of Palestine was a primary goal of the Obama Administration. Jones favors America laying out its positions and requirements up front in pushing for peace.

On the other hand, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) could still wield its cudgel. In March, Charles Freeman, a former ambassador under the first President Bush to Saudi Arabia and an Obama appointee to a top post on the National Intelligence Council, withdrew his name under exceptional pressure. Freeman's chief sin appears to have been frankness about the U.S.-Israel relationship. In a 2005 speech, he thought there was little hope for peace "as long as the United States continues unconditionally to provide the subsidies and political protection that make the Israeli occupation...possible." In 2006 he had the temerity to suggest that "left to its own devices, the Israeli establishment will make decisions that harm Israelis." And in March 2009 shortly after Dennis Blair, director of national intelligence, announced Freeman's appointment, Freeman

continued his frank assessment: "Israel is driving itself toward a cliff, and it is irresponsible not to question Israeli policy and to decide what is best for the American people."

For his refreshing candor, Freeman was pilloried by a blog of former AIPAC director Steven Rosen (who faces federal charges of espionage for giving Israel classified Pentagon documents). Senator Charles Schumer also voiced his opposition to White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, and the Zionist Organization of America sent out an "action alert" to its members calling for a Congressional investigation of Freeman. To his credit, Blair defended Freeman for what the *New York Times* characterized as "his strong views and quick mind," saying "he [Blair] hoped he [Freeman] would challenge an intelligence community that for years had been criticized for groupthink."¹⁵ It was not to be.

As for Mitchell, once named he worked quickly. The staff of eight Mitchell gathered around himself was seaworthy and seasoned, if not star-studded. He named three deputies: David Hale, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, to focus on political issues; Lieutenant General Keith Dayton, who had been training Palestinian forces, to focus on security; and Mara Rudman, Mitchell's new chief of staff, who would focus on economics. Fred Hof was the Syria expert. There were several Jewish American aides, including one three years out of college. The sole Arab American was a holdover from the Bush years—in fact, many administrations—as the Arabic translator.

Perhaps the most intriguing of Mitchell's team was fellow New Englander Mara Rudman. With a reputation for straight talk and steeliness, Rudman "is known for being tough on everyone." The Hyannis native apparently once "yelled" at an Israeli ambassador over Israel's arm sales to China. She also lectured someone in the Palestinian Authority on corruption.¹⁶ Unlike many past Middle East appointees who have come up through the Israel Lobby ranks, Rudman seems clear of them. She is known as a progressive in the Jewish community on Palestine; in fact, she studied under Ian Lustick of Dartmouth, the first American scholar to detail the second class status of Arabs in Israel in the landmark book, *Arabs in the Jewish State*.¹⁷ Lustick was faculty advisor to Hillel at Dartmouth; he also later served as an informal advisor to the first President Bush during the period in which \$10 billion in U.S. loan guarantees were held up—briefly—over Israeli settlements. Lustick roundly criticized George W. Bush's Middle East strategies in *Trapped in the War on Terror*.¹⁸ Today on the faculty at the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Lustick has been attacked by Campus Watch, an organization that combs academia for anyone who criticizes Israel.

Rudman herself is no stranger to Israel or the West Bank, where she traveled in 1986 to gather material on deportations and detentions of Palestinian activists. Her research became her report in the 1988 *Harvard Human Rights Yearbook*. She graduated from Harvard Law School in 1990. According to Robert Malley,

a former Clinton Middle East peace negotiator who worked with Rudman in the late 1990s, she took lessons away from their abortive, late-starting effort: "The U.S. had to be more assertive about its own interests and not be pushed around by either side."¹⁹

Since, excepting the 1973 oil boycott, the Arabs have never pushed anyone around on this issue, there's no mistaking which side she may be most effective in confronting, giving Rudman a fascinating, unique role under Mitchell.

Obama wasted no time in dispatching Mitchell to the region five days after taking office. The envoy traveled to Israel, the West Bank, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, France, and England, as well as to the site of talks between Israel and Syria in Istanbul. He returned from the whirlwind tour on February 3, holding matters close to his chest. A second trip later in the spring had him more open, candidly saying to Prime Minister Netanyahu that the settlements in the West Bank had to stop. The Israeli leader did no jig. In fact, Mitchell's statements weren't much different from the conclusion he had reached for a Presidential commission in 2001—Israel, dismantle settlements; Hamas, forswear violence and suicide bombing. Both parties remained unmoved.

Still, the Mitchell Mission was quietly relentless. It opened a second office in Jerusalem (its home base being the State Department). Mitchell seemed to be in it for the long haul, like his president. There was no mistaking his optimism and faith in the human spirit. He has said, "There's no such thing as a conflict that cannot be ended. Conflicts are created, conducted and sustained by human beings. They can be ended by human beings."²⁰

The same day Obama dispatched Mitchell to the Middle East, he conducted his first major media interview. Surely one was meant to reinforce the gravity of the other. The interview was granted to Hisham Melhem, a longtime Washington-based Middle East journalist who was now reporting for *Al-Arabiya*.²¹ Obama praised Mitchell to Melhem as someone "of enormous stature," an American rarity "brokering peace deals." While admitting that to the United States "Israel's security is paramount," he underscored that "there are Israelis who recognize that it is important to achieve peace. They will be willing to make sacrifices if the time is appropriate and if there is serious partnership on the other side." Obama pledged to forge with the Arab world "a new partnership based on mutual respect and mutual interest," and he praised King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia for the 2002 peace initiative that guaranteed Israel recognition from the entire Arab world if it withdrew from the West Bank and dismantled settlements, giving Palestinians their state. "It took great courage," Obama told Melhem, "to put forward something that is as significant as that."

Given that the president himself seemed to see the Abdullah initiative as a "serious partnership on the other side," Melhem might have pressed Obama further as to who was a serious partner and who wasn't. What he did do is mention

the disillusionment and lost hope of Palestinians. "Time is running out on the two-state solution," Melhem noted, "mainly because of the settlement activities."

"Will it still be possible to see a Palestinian state—and [do] you know the contours of it—with the first Obama administration?" Melhem asked.

Obama said he "wouldn't put a time frame on it," but did not hesitate to describe what it should look like: "I think it is possible for us to see a Palestinian state...that is contiguous, that allows freedom of movement for its people, that allows for trade with other countries." He went on: "Look, I think anybody who has studied the region recognizes that the situation for the ordinary Palestinian in many cases has not improved."

To put it mildly. There's some code here. Obama knows that nobody is impeding "freedom of movement" or trade for Palestinians but Israelis. Contiguity? That's an implicit rebuke of George W. Bush's approval of Israeli settlement growth and "Jim Crow" bypass roads that don't allow Arabs to drive or walk on them. The West Bank under George W. Bush forced Palestinian towns and communities into ever smaller, isolated units—the direct result of the Jewish settlements. Contiguity means: get rid of the settlements. Sooner rather than later he is going to have to ratchet that imperative up, because you can't have contiguity and most settlements at the same time. It's either West Bank Bantustans and no state, or a state that is contiguous. So inside that apparent mild response of Obama's was a kernel of policy.

As he did in the Iowa debates for the presidency two years before, Obama framed the problem for Melhem in terms of family: "The bottom line in all these talks...is, is a child in the Palestinian Territories going to be better off? Do they have a future for themselves? And is the child in Israel going to feel confident about his or her safety and security?" He concluded, "If we can keep the focus on making their lives better and look forward, and not simply think about all the conflicts and tragedies of the past, then I think we have an opportunity to make real progress."

The conversation strayed to Al-Qaeda, who Obama ventured "seem nervous" over his ascension to power. "Why?" Melhem asked.

"Their ideas are bankrupt," Obama said flatly. "There are no actions that they've taken that say a child in the Muslim world is getting a better education because of them." He reiterated a theme of his inaugural speech: "You will be judged on what you've built, not what you've destroyed."

Obama made no bones about the advantage of a president with experience in the Muslim world: "The language we use has to be a language of respect. I have Muslim members of my family. I have lived in Muslim countries." The new president did not hesitate to assert that "America was not born as a colonial power." But he implied that we had forfeited that moral high ground in recent years in the Middle East: "The same partnership that America had with the Muslim world as

recently as 20 or 30 years ago, there's no reason why we can't restore that."

Melhem did not follow up on that intriguing analysis. What, indeed, was the dividing point in Obama's mind? Thirty years ago was the Iranian revolution. But as far as the Israel-Palestine dispute goes, the big date will always be 1967—when Israel captured lands of four Arab countries. Because of settlement of that captured land, the matter is still bitterly and violently contested. That was 42 years ago. U.S. relations with the Arab and Muslim world have never been the same since.

"Obama made no bones about the advantage of a president with experience in the Muslim world: 'The language we use has to be a language of respect. I have Muslim members of my family. I have lived in Muslim countries.'"

Ending the interview on Iran, Obama declared that Iranians are "a great people and Persian civilization is a great civilization." While acknowledging problem spots—"threats to Israel," "pursuit of a nuclear weapon," "support for terrorist organizations"—Obama reiterated his campaign pledge: "It is important for us to be willing to talk to Iran," and he echoed the image of "the unclenched fist" in his inaugural address—if Iranians "uncleth" it, "they will find an extended hand from us." It was a landmark interview at the beginning of an almost revolutionary presidency confronting a world full of trouble.

As for Guantanamo, shutting it down and stopping torture were important policy decisions that armed Mitchell going into the region; it is inconceivable that Mitchell would have had any leverage otherwise. Obama moved quickly to assign counsel to all Guantanamo prisoners; on June 11, 2009, Congress passed legislation that would fund bringing detainees to the United States for trial. At least 65 of the existent 229 detainees (of 779 ever kept there) have been cleared for release from Guantanamo, with 11 having been already released.²²

But the matter is more complicated that just shutting down Guantanamo, and the status of the remaining detainees is varied and challenging. Where would they all go? As China was still calling four Chinese-Muslim Uighurs "terror suspects," the Obama government ruled out returning them there for fear of torture or execution. They were flown out of Guantanamo to Bermuda on June 11. But Bermuda was only a temporary stay, and the British chafed that they were not consulted on the matter. There are Uighur immigrant communities in the United States, including an estimated 300 in the Washington, D.C., area, but Congressional opposition to settling the Uighur detainees—or any of the detainees—in the United States is strong.²³ In August 2009, 13 Uighur detainees agreed to accept the island nation of Palau's offer of asylum.²⁴

One by one, detainees are being sifted for repatriation. In June two were released to their home countries of Iraq and Chad. The Chadian had been the youngest detainee; he was picked up in Pakistan in 2001 at the age of 14, and had spent around a third of his life in detention for no apparent crime. With extreme reluctance, in the early months of the Obama Administration, France and England each took one detainee, the latter an Algerian Red Crescent aid worker swept up in Bosnia and accused of ties to Al-Qaeda. Lakhdar Boumediene was interrogated more than 120 times at Guantanamo in his seven years there, forced for two years of a hunger strike to prove his innocence that he voluntarily broke only twice—the day Obama was elected and the day a judge ordered his release. Perhaps the biggest nightmare is that of Abdul Rahim Abdul Razak al-Janko, a Syrian national who was actually tortured by Al-Qaeda, spent 18 months in a Taliban prison after being taken for a U.S. spy, and then when he was found by U.S. forces in Afghanistan, made the supreme blunder of seeking help from a country he thought would enforce human rights violations. Al-Janko spent eight years at Guantanamo suspected of being a terrorist against the United States. He was finally released by order of a judge on June 23, 2009, his lawyer seeking some safe haven.

Five high-ranking Al-Qaeda members, including Khalid Shaykh Mohammed, are being tried at a military court in Guantanamo, where on December 20, 2008, they pleaded guilty to all charges. However, to date only one detainee has been brought to face trial in a criminal court (Ahmed Ghalani to New York in June 2009 for the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa).²⁵ Several prisoners originally charged and incarcerated stateside, however, have been indicted and convicted on terrorism charges, including an Arab American who grew up in Falls Church, Virginia, Ahmed Omar Abu Ali, 28, sentenced to life in prison in July 2009.²⁶

Published shortly after the presidential election, a University of California, Berkeley, study of 62 men who were held for an average of three years at Guantanamo before being released without being accused of any crime was revealing—and shocking.²⁷ One-third reported being handed over to the Americans by bounty hunting warlords. Those physically abused or tortured suffered such treatment before they arrived at Guantanamo—most at Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan. Two-thirds of the former detainees suffer significant psychological problems and are destitute, shunned by family, friends, and their communities. None has received any compensation from the U.S. government.

To add to the complications, even if the Guantanamo shutdown were to go smoothly, there are still 680 detainees at the Bagram prison in Afghanistan. How are they to be dealt with? With the Afghan war still going on, Obama has not given an indication of their fate.

On the critical issue of treatment, Obama told his interviewer on *60 Minutes* right after the election, “America doesn’t torture. I am going to make sure that we

don't torture." That and closing Guantanamo were "part and parcel of an effort to regain America's moral stature," he said.²⁸ Yet it was something bordering on the bizarrely predictable that former Vice President Dick Cheney, hearing Obama's banning of torture, rushed to confirm two untoward, if not contradictory, things: first, that the Bush Administration did not countenance torture or allow it, and that "enhanced interrogation," such as waterboarding, was necessary to keep America safe. Cheney insisted the crisis of September 11 was so severe that it warranted these "extraordinary measures."²⁹ Which, of course, he claims, were not torture, leaving to the imagination what effectively drowning someone upside down was supposed to be called.

Perhaps Richard Cohen caught it best in his January 27, 2009, *Washington Post* column, "Torture? Prosecute Us, Too." Cohen made the point that Bush had a 92 percent approval rating just after 9/11, and that torture was discussed openly in the press, some saying it was efficacious, some not. Alan Dershowitz suggested using "torture warrants," as if giving legal cover for something *prima facie* immoral and unconstitutional made it moral. (The Deputy Assistant Attorney General John Yoo's August 1, 2002 and October 23, 2001 memos to Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez did as much.³⁰) In short, Cohen argued that the American public reelected Bush in 2004 knowing full well what areas of moral turpitude the administration was dipping into. Today, Georgetown law professor David Cole suggests that a blue ribbon commission of Congress or the president needs to be created—something of which Cohen approves—to find out "what went wrong, what (if anything) went right and to report not only to Congress but to us."³¹ Regarding torture, the columnist Eugene Robinson called for the same thing to "tell us exactly what was done in our name," though "realistically some facts are going to be redacted. Realistically, some officials who may deserve to face criminal charges will not."³² Such a truth commission should be cleansing, though how those who tortured, knowing it was torture and knowing the government was lying about it, could escape punishment is hard to swallow.

In tandem with closing Guantanamo and the rejection of torture, Obama's first week began to close the parenthesis on Bush's tragic, off-track war in Iraq. On February 27, 2009, Obama announced that the combat mission in Iraq would end on August 31, 2010.³³ It was somewhat longer than his 16-month campaign promise (roughly three months longer), but it finally gave Americans—and Iraqis—a sense that the nightmare was over. Actually, 35,000 to 50,000 troops would stay on for one more year for security, training, and counterterrorist operations.³⁴ That potentially problematic rider granted, Obama cut the Iraq war several years shy of America's longest war—Vietnam (11 years). Of course, the Afghan conflict, which began in 2001, was probably going to last longer; Obama was increasing troops for that theater. Opinions in Iraq varied as to what effect the American pullout would have on the tortured country, ranging from cynicism

that we would ever really complete it to increased Iraqi confidence to predictions of an out-and-out civil war. It seemed likely that Iraq would follow the Vietnam model after our withdrawal—chaos, authoritarianism—but it could also find renewal and freedom being “on its own,” rebuilding infrastructure and national life. In any case, Iraq was the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time, and few will gain from it for some years, if then.

In mid-spring 2009, Obama took on Israel over settlements. The flurry of pronouncements on this perennial sticking point had to be calibrated to gain credibility for his speech to the Muslim world in late May. The repudiation of settlements by Obama was not a full scale assault or withdrawal of aid, at least not at first, but it was stern and unwavering, and it reversed almost 30 years of American largess on settlements, one that reached its nadir with George W. Bush’s apparent 2004 secret “green light” memo to Sharon to increase them at no cost to our relationship or aid.

Mitchell’s wisdom on a settlement freeze is well-known in Israel; it dates back to his efforts under President Clinton. But in early March 2009, under the new administration, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton entered the fray. When Israelis announced they were going to build a park for Jewish settlers in East Jerusalem and unfortunately 88 Arab homes would have to disappear, Secretary Clinton called it “unhelpful” and later labeled settlements “an obstacle to peace.” Jerusalem mayor Nir Barkat called Clinton’s remarks “a lot of air.”³⁵

Then Benjamin Netanyahu came to town to meet the new president, followed shortly after by Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas. About the Israeli leader’s first meeting with Obama, a member of the Palestinian Parliament and former presidential candidate Mustafa Barghouti said, “It’s now or almost certainly never. If Obama lacks the political will to stand up to Netanyahu now, he will lack the capacity later... We Palestinians seek freedom, not apartheid.”³⁶ At the same time, Debbie Menon, a writer for *Aljazeera Magazine*, asked rhetorically if Obama could get out from under the AIPAC vise, and then answered her own question: “Probably not and live.”³⁷ Britain’s own Mideast envoy, Tony Blair, was not quite as cynical, but cautioned that the “window of opportunity” was small. “Up until the end of this year,” he said.³⁸

So what happened?

Obama flatly said in a press conference with Netanyahu that stopping settlements was part of Israel’s obligation under international law; he further stated that Israel should lift the three-year-old embargo against Gaza to spare civilians suffering in that cauldron. Predictably, Netanyahu tried to act as if he hadn’t heard the new U.S. president and tried to deflect, demur, and sidetrack—to the “dangers” of Iran. On Palestine, he showed considerable chutzpah in increasing demands on the Palestinians while offering nothing on settlements. Jerusalem was to be Israel’s alone; Israel would control a West Bank state’s airspace; Palestine had to be

demilitarized; Israel would need more land from the West Bank “to defend itself.” He dickered over semantics: it was no longer enough for Palestinians to recognize the legitimacy of Israel as a state, but specifically to accept it as a “Jewish” state.³⁹ Palestinian leader Saeb Erekat later noted that Palestinians had already accepted Israel in the two-state solution, but to label it solely Jewish would be to disregard the fact that Israel is 20 percent Arab. It was hard not to see the verbal label as another stalling tactic by Netanyahu, who has been aces at this since he derailed the peace process in the late 1990s. Israel “could call itself whatever it wants to,” Erekat slyly suggested.⁴⁰

Obama couldn’t have been encouraged. Yet he did gently urge Arabs to “do a better job of providing [Israel] security assurances,” while also insisting that “Israel is going to have to take some difficult steps, as well,” saying settlements “will have to be stopped in order to move forward.”⁴¹

It is revealing that the *New York Times*, according to Yale professor David Bromwich, transformed the Netanyahu-Obama first encounter into “a story about Iran.” The whole Palestine emphasis was neglected. In fact, Obama had overturned Netanyahu’s logic—first Iran, then Palestine—into just the opposite:

If there is linkage between Iran and the Israel-Palestinian peace process, I personally believe it actually runs the other way. To the extent that we can make peace with the Palestinians—between Israelis and Palestinians—then I actually think it strengthens our hand in the international community in dealing with a potential Iranian threat.

This “inversion” of the Netanyahu doctrine, Bromwich noted, was not reported in the *New York Times*; in fact, he said, neither was it to be found in the *Washington Post*.⁴²

Another part of Obama’s joint press conference with Netanyahu did not find its way into either paper’s account—his sympathy for Gaza and warning to Israel. “The fact is that if the people of Gaza have no hope,” Obama said, “if they can’t get clean water at this point, if the border closures are so tight that it is impossible for reconstruction and humanitarian efforts to take place, then that is not going to be a recipe for Israel’s long-term security or a constructive peace track to move forward on.”⁴³

The *Post* did editorialize about test balloon rewards George Mitchell was sending up to coax Israelis into a settlement freeze, such as overflight or trade privileges with Arab countries. As for pressure on Israel itself, the *Post* noted solemnly, “If Mr. Obama genuinely intends to press for an early Israeli-Palestinian settlement, he will have to push U.S.-Israeli relations into a red zone of tension for the first time in many years.”⁴⁴

That “red zone” was already building in Capitol Hill, of all places, where

Netanyahu was astonished to find U.S. Congressmen criticizing settlements to his face. The chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Representative Gary Ackerman (D-NY), equated “terrorism and the march of settlements,” noting both constituted “shallow calculation and venal self-interest” that has “rendered impossible” a two-state solution.⁴⁵ Another normally strong defender of Israel, Representative Robert Wexler (D-FL), made the obvious refreshing—the idea that “Israel can continue to expand settlements” without crippling the two-state solution “is both unrealistic, and, I would respectfully suggest, hypocritical.”⁴⁶ According to the Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Netanyahu was stunned by these “harsh and unequivocal statements.”⁴⁷ No one had ever heard anything like it on Capitol Hill, which has been described as “an Israeli game preserve” for decades. Clearly, Obama’s principled lead on settlements and his worldwide popularity were giving Congressmen cover to voice private reservations in public for the first time.

Settlements were addressed with Netanyahu “forcefully,” according to the *Washington Post*, in separate meetings with George Mitchell and with National Security Advisor General James Jones.⁴⁸ Both officials made specific requests, though these weren’t revealed publicly. On May 20, Secretary Clinton also weighed in on, of all places, *Al Jazeera*: “We want to see a stop to settlement construction, additions, natural growth—any kind of settlement activity.”⁴⁹ This effectively put a halt to the linguistic torture over “natural growth,” which seemed to mean anything from a kitchen remodel to a guest house for 10 relatives to a new housing development adjacent to an old one. Stop, Clinton said, period.

Over the mounting furor over settlements, Israel simply snubbed President Obama, Secretary Clinton, and leaders of Congress. Israeli government spokesman Mark Regev confirmed that “normal growth in these communities must continue,” that is, expansion of units and housing.⁵⁰ The rebuff seemed timed to welcome Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who had just arrived in Washington. Abbas, credited with cleaning up Palestinian finances and stabilizing security on the West Bank, still trails Hamas in popularity and desperately needs U.S. progress on some fundamental issues—such as settlements—to stay in power.

Public discourse on the issue of settlements mounted in the U.S. press, too, unlike any time since 1980, when the *Washington Post* editorialized that an aid cut commensurate with their value might have the desired effect of changing behavior.⁵¹ Writer and novelist David Ignatius defined the difficulty of the problem: “What’s agonizing when you read this 42-year history is that settlements have created a powerful pressure group that opposes the limitations that Obama insists are necessary.” That is, the settlers themselves for whom their stake in the “wilderness” of the West Bank is “intensely personal.” But as Ignatius asserts, the issue is no less intense or personal for Palestinians, for whom the West Bank is no wilderness, but rather home for over a thousand years. Ignatius called it “a blood

knot that Obama proposes to untie.”

“Obama will have to articulate U.S. policy more clearly and emphatically than have any of his predecessors, and he will have to demonstrate that he means what he says,” wrote Ignatius. “To make peace, he will first have to make some enemies.”⁵²

There was no mistaking who those enemies would be, nor their fury—the settlers themselves and their ultra-nationalist, right-wing sympathizers in the Likud Party in Israel and among American Orthodox Jews and Christian evangelicals. These are the people, after all, who gave succor to and fanned the attitudes of the assassin of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin—Yigal Amir, who is serving a life sentence in prison and occasionally goes on hunger strikes, convinced he was right. Their manifest destiny and millenarian fantasies are tied, as well, to cheap, subsidized housing—not something easily given up.

The final early overture for peace in the Middle East came when Obama spoke at Cairo University on June 3, 2009—roughly 150 days into his new presidency. Nothing like this speech, spread across the entire world by Internet, cable television, and cell phone, had ever occurred before. Certainly never before had the Muslim world been addressed so specifically by an American president, much less from the heart of the Arab world. It was perhaps the most dramatic moment in international affairs for an American president since Ronald Reagan spoke in Germany with his famous “tear down this wall” speech. Some thought for worldwide impact of an American’s speech, one would have to go back to Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream,” unfurled at the Lincoln Memorial. Some saw parallels to FDR’s “a date which will live in infamy” address at the beginning of America’s entry into World War II. Others could not help but see a touch of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural, its empathy and tenderness towards a presumed enemy, its sense of reconciliation “with malice toward none, with charity for all.”

But most agreed there had never been a speech in American history like Obama’s in Cairo, nor one with more at stake.

It is instructive to examine the attitudes circulating in the Arab world, especially towards the West, on the eve of Obama’s address. For this, a Zogby public opinion poll taken in May 2009 in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon is useful.⁵³

According to this poll, almost half of Arabs (45 percent) had a favorable view of Obama (this shot up to about 75 percent after the Cairo speech). By contrast, 61 percent disliked George W. Bush strongly. Only 22 percent had a positive view of Hillary Clinton, and 45 percent felt negatively about her. Only 14 percent had a negative view of Obama.

The openness to Obama, said Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland, who conducts the annual survey of Arab public opinion, is “most striking” and “something profoundly new, given the last eight years.” At the same time, he

cautioned that it was not yet “a full embrace.”⁵⁴

In tandem with this initial attraction to the new American leader, a majority of Arabs (51 percent) express hope for U.S. Middle East policy. But this did not translate into total trust: 77 percent of Arabs still identify the United States and Israel as the two biggest threats they face. This is, to be sure, somewhat of an improvement over 2008 (when 88 percent felt America a top threat), but the day in the Middle East is far from won, at least as the Arabs see it. They like what they see in and hear from Obama, but they are holding back, waiting for action.

“[Obama’s speech in Cairo] was perhaps the most dramatic moment in international affairs for an American president since Ronald Reagan spoke in Germany with his famous ‘tear down this wall’ speech.”

Not surprisingly, the two most pressing issues for Arabs are Iraq and the Israel-Palestine dispute, though the fact that Iraq outdistances Israel-Palestine in Arab minds leads to the conclusion that Arabs are using withdrawal from Iraq as a litmus test for America. If that stalls, nothing is expected to advance for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Sixty-five percent of Arabs believe that if the United States withdraws by the end of 2011, Iraqis will peacefully reach accord on their differences. Fully 72 percent of Arabs feel the war made Iraq worse off.

Arabs feel the Gaza war drained Israel in spite of what they concede as its victory. Those who sympathize both with Fatah and Hamas greatly outnumber those who prefer one side (Hamas, 22 percent) or the other (Fatah, 12 percent). A substantial majority (74 percent) prefers a Palestinian coalition government, with only 7 percent wanting Hamas to dominate. Fully 73 percent of Arabs support the two-state solution in Palestine, thus accepting Israel in the region. But the number opposed to it has increased—perhaps as a result of the violent Gaza war—to 25 percent (versus 19 percent in 2008). When Arabs are asked about the prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace, pessimism abounds—50 percent say it will never happen. At the same time, the number of those who believe peace will win out—though they say it will take more than five years under Obama—increased, from 27 percent in 2008 to 40 percent in 2009. Clearly, this growth in the “hope” factor owes itself to the ascension of Obama. The half of all Arabs having no faith in the United States in these matters threatens to increase and swallow the nascent hope if nothing concrete takes place.

Significant by its smallness, only 3 percent of Arabs thought Afghanistan/Pakistan of great importance as an issue, though that is where Obama is sending the troops. Though concern about Iran as a top threat has doubled, it is still relatively small (from 7 percent in 2008 to 13 percent), compared to concern over Iraq and

Israel-Palestine. As for the leader most Arabs admire, the leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hasan Nasrallah, took something of a nosedive in the poll—only 6 percent identify with him (down from 26 percent in 2008). In 2009, the leader most Arabs admire is Hugo Chavez, the ultra-independent, iconoclastic president of Venezuela. This indicates a sourness with the Great Powers in the Arab world and a hunger for not just truth to power, but truth from power.

Shortly before Obama spoke in Cairo, a Cairo electrician told a reporter, “Obama is just a prettier face. I’m sure his intentions are in the right place, but I don’t expect much from the man.”⁵⁵ This kind of bedrock cynicism was perhaps the greatest challenge for Obama, who rewrote his speech relentlessly over the Atlantic while his aides slept. Egypt’s state-owned newspaper, *Rose El-Youssef*, put it bluntly: “Don’t be biased towards Israel, don’t interfere in countries’ internal affairs and don’t give lessons in democracy.”⁵⁶

Speaking from a country (Egypt) that America has favored with more aid since 1967 than it dispersed in the Marshall Plan—a country that has repressed democrats and Islamists, some of whom favor democracy—presented a sticky wicket to Obama, to say the least. How to address the democracy issue in the Middle East, so botched by President Bush, was, after Israel and Palestine, his biggest challenge going in. Lastly, how would Obama face nearly half a century of bad dealings with the Middle East, a history of espionage and favoritism that runs from the assassination of Iranian Prime Minister Mossadeq in 1953 to the airlift to Israel in the 1973 war to the American silence during the siege and destruction of Beirut by Israel in 1982 to the sacking of Baghdad by Bush. It is not a pretty legacy, and it was not at all certain Obama would even face it directly. After all, the first challenge—rampant cynicism—was born out of what is widely seen as U.S. manipulation of the Arab world for its own benefit.

Jordan-based political analyst and critic of settlements Mouin Rabbani admitted, “It’s true Obama’s election created a new wave of hope. But if he pulls the same tricks as his predecessor—making some nice statements and doing the opposite in practice—people will be disabused of their illusions quite quickly.”⁵⁷ With youth unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa the highest in the world—and one-quarter of young Egyptians out of work—the attraction of extremist anger such as Al-Qaeda’s remains ever-present.⁵⁸ Al-Qaeda’s number two man, Ayman al-Zawahiri, once tortured in an Egyptian prison, dismissed Obama’s visit even before he arrived, calling Obama’s Egyptian hosts “slaves” who have converted Egypt into “an international station of torture in America’s war on Islam.” Al-Zawahiri referred to Obama putting on “the Jew’s cap” in Jerusalem and compared him, Colin Powell, and Condoleezza Rice to “house Negroes.” Obama’s messages were “bloody” and his visits to the Arab world “farcical.”⁵⁹

And yet young Muslims were leaning to hear Obama, as much out of novelty as need. Said 19-year-old Mustapha Ragab after prayers at a Cairo mosque, “When

someone talks to me with dignity and respect, then I will feel I could follow him." His words were echoed with unalloyed verve by a Palestinian clothing store owner in a refugee camp in Jordan. Awni Shatarat, 45, effused, "It's so exciting to have a black man run the entire world."⁶⁰

If it were only that easy. No one caught the difficulty of the moment better than Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Anthony Shadid: "He [Obama] will face the legacy of names like Haditha, Guantanamo, and Abu Ghraib, places that have become more symbol than geography over nearly a decade of perhaps the most traumatic chapter in America's relationship with the Muslim world." Shadid emphasized the nearly forgotten 2005 killing at Haditha in Iraq of 24 people, mostly children. Of the eight Marines who were indicted, six had charges dropped and one was acquitted; only Staff Sergeant Frank Wuterich faces charges of voluntary manslaughter. The Arabs do not call it a crime or killing, Shadid noted. They use the Arabic *majzara*, or massacre. For Yusuf Eid Ahmad, whose four brothers died at Haditha, standing in the very bedroom where they were gunned down by U.S. soldiers, there was no justice, "just talk." "The entire town has talked," he said. "What has it brought us?"

More than freedom, "justice" was on the lips of Arab intellectuals, leaders, and shopkeepers as Obama prepared to speak. After three years in prison, Syrian writer and dissenter Michel Kilo said to Shadid, "I am hoping to hear words of reconciliation. I want to hear the word 'justice.'" Sundus Yahya, a clerk in a Baghdad clothing store, said bitterly, "They understand justice in the United States, but it is never applied here." Azzam Alwash, an Iraqi American environmentalist and educator, commented, "The problem is if Obama apologizes for these past endeavors, he will undermine the U.S. positions vis à vis current oppressors. He will be insulting his host. It's not doable."⁶¹

Into this cauldron, Obama stepped.⁶² One of the first things he did was speak to the audience—3,500 at Cairo University (500 of whom were journalists) and 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide—as an Arab would, not only with the traditional Arabic greeting, but with perfect accent and pitch: "Assalaamu alaykum." Because he did not say "Salaam alekum," but pronounced each syllable like someone who has heard it often and pronounced it often, it did not come off as patronization. Obama did not hide from the start that he himself was moved, almost in awe. He paid respect to the ancient ground on which he stood—"the timeless city of Cairo"—and gave the traditional greeting as one "of peace from Muslim communities in my country." This was subtle, but ice breaking. He was speaking not only as an American, but also on behalf of other Muslims who live in America. It was a masterstroke of sociology, history, and psychology. Before the first paragraph was done, Obama had established two things so difficult for an American leader facing the Arab Middle East: identification—empathy, really—and respect.

Following closely on this exceptional opening were two more elements that are rare, if nonexistent, in the official addresses of Americans to Arabs: a sense of history and a sense of injustice. Both showed intelligence sorely missing in our leaders in recent years. He admitted “a time of tension between the United States and Muslims around the world” that had antedated current policy debates. He did not shy from Western responsibility, something Bush simply could never do: “Tension has been fed by colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims.” He went deeper, pointing to a “Cold War in which Muslim-majority countries were too often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations.” This may seem hardly notable—colonialism and the use of Third World puppets to face off with the Soviet Union is history. But what is really notable is how long prior to this moment American leaders avoided facing history as it has played out in the Middle East. Obama went even further, admitting that “modernity and globalization” have been viewed by some as “hostile” to Islam. He didn’t try to sell them on the Internet; he saw the problem of modernization from the level of their local mosque.

It wasn’t a direct apology, but as close as he could come without labeling Egypt itself *non grata*. Two paragraphs in, Obama was looking at the problems through Muslim eyes. Later in the speech concerning Iran, he took his initial premise about colonialism and deepened the self criticism. I don’t think an American president has ever admitted in office to what the U.S. did to Mossadeq, but Obama did, before the entire Muslim world: “In the middle of the Cold War, the United States played a role in the overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government.” This kind of straightforward admission of wrongdoing gained Obama latitude in pointing out blindspots and difficulties in the behavior of Muslims themselves. One could not possibly be done without the other, though Bush had been expert in pillorying terrorists for eight years, with little or no inward look.

Obama’s third paragraph took on, briefly, “violent extremists” who toppled the twin towers on September 11, 2001. Smartly, he did not give them a name; he did not obsess about or elevate them, as had President Bush with his “axis-of-evil” moniker. He neither discounted them nor inflated them: “a small, but potent minority of Muslims.” He then went into a spiritual, cultural, and sociological discussion of what binds Muslims, Christians, and Jews—Westerners and those from the Middle East—together. “America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition,” he underscored. “Instead they overlap and share common principles of justice and progress, tolerance and dignity of all human beings.” Note the first principle uttered was “justice.” Something, if not someone, had gotten through about the importance of that word and concept to his audience.

At the end of his speech, Obama quoted from the holy books of the three great monotheistic religions, but at the beginning he quoted only from the Qur’an. He called it, again, unlike any previous U.S. president, “the Holy Qur’an,” the way a

Muslim would: "The Holy Qur'an tells us, 'Be conscious of God and speak always the truth.'" He promised to do just that with humility and a firm belief "that the interests we share as human beings are far more powerful than the forces that drive us apart." Just as he was showcasing justice at the outset, he also promised truth, something in short supply when it comes to power in the Middle East, especially American power. This is a risky promise for any politician, but Obama was rapidly transcending the boundaries of politics as usual. No one could possibly call this effortless—there was great weight in the speech and in its delivery. But its genuineness and resoluteness were unmistakable.

Before listing six challenges the West and the Middle East face together, Obama gave a history lesson in the positive interplay between the two cultures, especially the debts the West owes Islam (e.g. algebra and tools of navigation such as the magnetic compass, as well as "the mastery of pens and printing, our understanding of how disease spreads and how it can be healed," "soaring spires," "timeless poetry," and "places of peaceful contemplation"). This was not just a list excerpted from an encyclopedia. It was written honorifically and with proper alliteration—not just architecture, but "soaring spires." It was suggestive in a personified, poetic way; instead of talking about the courtyards of mosques, he implicitly referred to them as "places of peaceful contemplation." This is a subtlety that could occur only to someone who has "walked the walk" at a mosque and even prayed there, long before he was a politician, as Obama undoubtedly did with his father's family, if not his Muslim neighbors in Chicago. He was proud of this: "I am a Christian, but my father came from a Kenyan family that includes generations of Muslims." He spoke fondly of "the call of the *azaan* at the break of dawn and the fall of dusk." He used the Arabic *azaan* (the call to prayer) instead of *muezzin* (the prayer caller), a more commonly known word in the West, placing emphasis on the faith itself, rather than a vehicle. Again, it was subtle but powerful to an audience that values its language as much as its faith (in fact, the two are often intertwined).

Obama noted that the first country to recognize the United States (in 1779) was Morocco. White House speech writer Ben Rhodes came up with a quote from second president John Adams after the signing of the Treaty of Tripoli, which followed a troublesome sea war with Barbary pirates, the first "terrorists," as Bush would have called them: "The United States has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility of Muslims." Obama revealed there are seven million Muslim Americans, with incomes and education higher than average. He ran down a list of Muslim American achievements, including a Muslim American who "built our tallest building" (the Sears Tower—that, too, was a referential coup, as it couldn't but help counter those who see Muslims as only taking towers down). He pointed proudly to the first Muslim member of Congress, Representative Keith Ellison, D-MN, who had recently taken the oath

to defend the country with his hand on a Qur'an Thomas Jefferson kept in his library.

This connecting to an audience is, of course, good speechifying, but it was instructive in two rather uncommon ways—both to the Muslim world (which often perceives Muslims to be under wraps, if not under the boot, in America) and to the American-at-large who would only demonize Islam. He took a bold stance for clarity and a partnership “based on what Islam is, not what it isn’t,” and he pledged “to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam wherever they appear.” We have had presidents criticize such stereotypes in the past; Bush did. But to say you will actively fight them? That is something new from such a high post.

At the same time, Obama did not let the Muslim world off the hook: “America is not a crude stereotype of a self-interested empire. The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. We were born out of the revolution against empire.” He emphasized the Latin phrase on our penny, *E pluribus unum*: Out of many, one. That message of unity amid the polyglot and diverse had to speak to Islam, a religion that emphasizes diversity-in-unity—the *ummah*—spread across the globe from the mosques of Detroit to those in Jakarta, all speaking Arabic. He used the *lingua franca* of a dead empire (Latin) to enliven and pay homage to a live one. Again, linguistic grace—and canniness.

After this overture, Obama baldly admitted, “Words alone cannot meet the needs of our people.” He pledged to act, for better relations would only come “if we act boldly in the years ahead.” If not, “our failure...will hurt us all.” The world has shrunk; it is an inescapably contingent place to Obama:

When a financial system weakens in one country, prosperity is hurt everywhere. When a new flu infects one human being, we are all at risk. When one nation pursues a nuclear weapon, the risk of nuclear attack rises for all nations. When violent extremists operate in one stretch of mountains, people are endangered across an ocean. And when innocents are slaughtered in Bosnia and Darfur, that is a stain on our collective conscience. That is what it means to share this world in the twenty-first century.

He pleaded with his audience—and in some ways, with Americans back home—to let go of the selfishness of nations and tribalism: “Such attitudes are self-defeating. Given our interdependence, any world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will inevitably fail.” These visionary aspects have made some conclude that Obama’s Cairo address was the most concrete evidence of what in effect is the first global presidency. It comes with deep requirements of humility—and accuracy. There is no more room for Powell-like speeches at the U.N. with false data and phony bugaboos.

The first of six tensions Obama asked all to “squarely” face was “violent extremism in all its forms,” pointing to the *raison d'être* of his seeking the presidency—to get out of Iraq, the war that had almost destroyed America. Obama asserted flatly, “America is not—and never will be—at war with Islam.” But he boldly took on conspiracy theorists about 9/11 and by implication Al-Qaeda, admitting “some question or even justify the events of 9/11.” His methodology was the facts: almost 3,000 people were killed on that day, almost all civilians. He reminded his audience that “extremists” have “killed people of different faiths; more than any other, they have killed Muslims.” He insisted “their actions are irreconcilable with the rights of human beings, the progress of nations, and with Islam.” Then his second Qur’anic invocation occurred: “The Holy Qur’an teaches that whoever kills an innocent, it is as if he has killed all mankind.” Clearly, he was enlisting young, fervent Muslims in the fight to keep the good name of Islam and not let it be consumed “by the narrow hatred of a few.”

Obama turned from poetry to plain statement about 9/11: “These are not opinions to be debated; these are facts to be dealt with.” (Odd, given the thoroughness of his speech, that he did not say what we know to be true—10 percent of those killed in the World Trade Center were Muslim, hundreds of people.)⁶³ As he dealt with conspiracy theorists over 9/11, he challenged Holocaust deniers: “Six million Jews were killed—more than the entire Jewish population of Israel today. Denying that fact is baseless, ignorant, and hateful.” This took guts. It was aimed not only at Iran’s Ahmadinejad, but at those in the Muslim world whose anger over Israeli encroachment has slid into garden variety anti-Semitism.

Having done something no president has ever done—specific reference to destructive Western meddling in the Middle East—he gained the latitude to lecture his audience on the dangers of conspiracy theory and anti-Semitism. This is not just classic rhetorical strategy—it is essential to conflict resolution.

As for Iraq—forever tied in the American mind to 9/11—he admitted it was, unlike Afghanistan, “a war of choice” (here candor failed him—he didn’t say just how bad a choice it was) and promised “to leave Iraq to Iraqis” and to help get the country back on its feet “as a partner, never as a patron.” He granted that Iraq without “the tyranny of Saddam” was a better place, but he also quoted Thomas Jefferson that “the less we use our power, the greater it will be.” Tying up one of the blackest chapters in American history, Obama said U.S. combat soldiers would be outside Iraqi cities in a month (July 2009) and completely removed from the country by the end of 2011. He reiterated for his international audience that he had “unequivocally prohibited” torture and ordered Guantanamo prison closed by early 2010.

In the now-established method of his point-counterpoint speech—the concession, the request—Obama wrapped up the miserable legacy of Bush by asking his audience to take action: “The sooner the extremists are isolated and

unwelcome in Muslim communities, the sooner we will all be safer." Again, no elevation or name to "extremists." This wasn't damning with faint praise; it was damning by no name.

Having tied up Iraq and established his Muslim affinity credentials, Obama was ready to take on the issue everyone was waiting for: Israel-Palestine. He began, again, with a masterstroke of risk. He planted the most bitter pill for the Arabs right at the start of the discussion (but of course not the start of the speech, only long after warming his audience to his revolutionary sympathies): "America's bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable. It is based upon cultural and historical ties."

For an audience begging for the United States to break just such bonds, to repudiate its ties to a country routinely breaking international law, this seemed on the surface a loser. He went even further, saying "the aspiration for a Jewish homeland is rooted in a tragic history that cannot be denied." He then upped the ante, again chastising Holocaust deniers and those who repeat "vile stereotypes about Jews." No doubt he felt at this point in the speech he had gained trust to say and exact such things, although on inspection he hadn't done more than state what is self-evident and factual, as well as call for the same humanity towards Jews as towards Arabs.

Then the most electrifying—and new—part of an already emotional speech took place, launched by a decidedly understated assertion: Palestinians "have suffered in pursuit of a homeland." The lull before the storm. Obama plowed forward, admitting Palestinians "endure the daily humiliations—large and small—that come with occupation. So let there be no doubt: the situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable." Humiliation, occupation, intolerable—these angry words have never been spoken by a sitting U.S. president anywhere concerning Palestinians, certainly not in the Middle East. He then made his commitment to Palestinians equally emotional and firm: "America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own."

You can't have missed it: I got your back. It's an inner city pledge, a soldier's pledge, to watch out for each other. Although he said "America," he meant himself. He committed himself to getting it done, something none of his predecessors have been able to do, at risk, he implied, of being a turncoat, a coward—in short, unfaithful. It was a profound yet simple way to say what needed to be said and of pledging action, without yet taking action.

Then, in the logic of concession made, concession asked, Obama insisted that "Palestinians must abandon violence." He spoke with pride of his African-American roots, of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement: "It was not violence that won full and equal rights. It was a peaceful and determined insistence upon the ideals at the center of America's founding." Giving the

worldwide examples “South Africa to South Asia,” he asserted that “violence is a dead end. It is a sign of neither courage nor power to shoot rockets at sleeping children or to blow up old women on a bus. That is not how moral authority is claimed; that is how it is surrendered.” Powerful words obviously aimed at Hezbollah and Hamas—but also, by implication, the Israeli Defense Forces and Uzi-toting settlers.

Significantly, Obama did not spurn Hamas; in fact, he acknowledged its “support” among many Palestinians, but typically he appealed to its higher sense of “responsibilities.” He plainly saw a role for Hamas “fulfilling Palestinian aspirations and...unify[ing] the Palestinian people.” But Obama didn’t mince words, either: “Hamas must put an end to violence, recognize past agreements, and recognize Israel’s right to exist.” At the same time, he said, twining the two together: “Just as Israel’s right to exist cannot be denied, neither can Palestine’s.”

“You can’t have missed it: I got your back. It’s an inner city pledge, a soldier’s pledge, to watch out for each other. Although [Obama] said ‘America,’ he meant himself. He committed himself to [a Palestinian state], something none of his predecessors have been able to do, at risk, he implied, of being a turncoat, a coward—in short, unfaithful.”

Capping several weeks of American public displeasure at settlements, Obama rammed it home: “America does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements.” This was close to calling them illegal. “This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop.” Of course, if settlements are illegitimate, they will have to do more than stop being built; they will have to be, for the most part, shut down. On that thorny issue Obama was clearly trying to walk before running.

The third issue Obama took on in Cairo was nuclear weapons. Inevitably, this bent towards Iran, but Obama did not want to be “trapped in the past” in this relationship: “The question now is not what Iran is against, but what future it wants to build.” He pledged, as he had early in his presidential campaign, discussion “without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect.” He even hinted—for the first time for an American president—that countries in the region have a motive for developing nuclear weapons, that is, self-defense: “I understand those who protest that some countries have weapons that others do not.” There was no mistaking it—he was talking about Israel. Iran is hardly worried about Pakistan; both are worried about Israel and its absurdly undeclared arsenal of about 200 nuclear bombs. Obama was laying the groundwork for an Israeli admission of

the obvious to go forward with real disarmament. He also included an implicit warning to trigger-happy Israelis who seem to think it is their God-given mission to smite Arabs: "No single nation should pick and choose which nations hold nuclear weapons." He included Iran among those who "have the right to peaceful nuclear power," while committing the United States to disencumbering itself from nukes to encourage others to do so as well.

The three last issues Obama discussed were "softer" ones—democracy, religious freedom, and women's rights—softer in the sense that there was no specific, pressing policy issue hanging on them (though Iran's incipient revolt against the *mullahs* after a shady election would soon enough test the Administration's stance on democracy movements). Continuing his repudiation of George W. Bush's spreading of democracy by the sword, Obama said plainly, "No system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other." This is a wisdom drawn not just from the debacle in Iraq, but the prior one run by Rumsfeld, Cheney, and Co.—Vietnam. At the same time, Obama gave succor to those struggling for democracy in Muslim countries: "I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose." He reminded his audience: "These are not just American ideas; they are human rights."

About elective democracy, Obama made an important distinction: "Elections alone do not make true democracy." This was a subtle rebuke to the theocrats and others who tyrannize after gaining power by the ballot box, such as in Iran. In fact, the election of George W. Bush was not exactly among the cleanest, and the result came close to destroying the country.

Obama then segued from political to religious tolerance, and pointed honorifically to Islam's "proud tradition of tolerance," citing the melding of the three monotheisms in Andalusia and especially the resistance of Cordoba to the ravages of the Inquisition. Again, he used his own experience to bring home a point: "I saw it firsthand as a child in Indonesia where devout Christians worshipped freely in an overwhelmingly Muslim country." And he lectured those who would betray this inclusiveness of Islam by measuring "one's own faith by rejection of another's"—another rejection of fundamentalism. He made a direct plea for tolerance of Maronites in Lebanon, Copts in Egypt, and of Sunni and Shi'a for each other. And he did not shy from criticizing something about which most Americans are unaware but that is not unknown to his Muslim audience—American law against certain charities, making it harder for Muslims to give in the United States: "I am committed to working with American Muslims to ensure that they can fulfill *zakat*." This is not just a reference to tax code; this refers to the second Bush's blanket closing of Muslim charities in the United States, labeling

them “terrorist” organizations, a move that deeply offended American Muslims.

As for women, he again took the positive road, referring to the many women leaders in Muslim countries such as Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. He also struck a blow for the *hijab* (though that was his one mispronunciation): “I reject the view of some in the West that a woman who chooses to cover her hair is somehow less equal.” At the same time, he called for equal access to education for women as a universal human right.

But he ended his speech on a hopeful economic and educational note, remembering how a scholarship had brought his Kenyan father to America and asserting that “there need not be a contradiction between development and tradition.” He called for a kind of small business “peace corps” to partner with like minded businesspeople in Muslim countries, and promised a “Summit on Entrepreneurship” to deepen U.S.-Muslim business ties. He announced a “new global effort” with the Organization of the Islamic Conference to eradicate polio. Though buried in the speech, these concrete measures were not inconsequential.

Obama concluded with a sense of the fragility of existence: “All of us share this world for but a brief moment in time.” He pleaded with his audience for a regeneration of the Golden Rule “that still beats in the hearts of billions” and reminded all that “it is easier to start wars than to end them; it is easier to blame others than to look inward.” And then, after citing passages from the Qur’an, the Talmud, and the Bible on the importance of peacemaking for a holy life, he said simply, “That must be our work here on Earth.”

It was not a perfect speech. There was an uneasy contradiction over Afghanistan as Obama asserted that “we do not want to keep our troops in Afghanistan” at the same time as he was pouring them in. (He tried to take the edge off by promising \$11.8 billion in aid to rebuild Afghanistan and strengthen Pakistan.) He stepped back from supporting any democracy movements in the Muslim world by name (though, intriguingly, Egypt’s ruler-for-life Hosni Mubarak had his painting covered by red drapes behind Obama). He did not apologize for past American actions (though he implied sorrow for them). And though he was tough on Israel about settlements, he assigned no cost should Israel rebuff him, which it did almost immediately.

A baseball fan would have assigned it a triple—a great, strong hit, but not a home run. To get home, that will take painful action.

Still, in its relentless evenhandedness, plainspoken empathy, personal history, respect, and insistence on justice and the truth—along with an impressive grasp of central humanistic tenets in Islam—the Cairo speech was magisterial and may have obliterated the miserable legacy of George W. Bush in one masterstroke.

Reaction was immediate, excited, even amazed. One man yelled out, “Obama, we love you!”, to which the president smiled and said, “Thank you.” He received a standing ovation and chants of “O-Ba-Ma!” broke out, as if it were a campaign

rally.

Imam Yahya Hendi, Georgetown University's Muslim chaplain, thought the speech's frankness and its quoting of "Be conscious of God and speak always the truth"—an imam favorite—was its central attractiveness to Muslims. "It says, 'I am going to be truthful,'" Hendi said. "It says, 'Sometimes the truth is painful. I'm going to take you to it and some of it will be painful.' For me, that was good." Hendi also thought it was important that Obama appealed to extremists who use the Qur'an as cover by quoting the passage against killing innocents.⁶⁴

Expectedly, Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei dismissed Obama's "beautiful speeches" as unable to change those who "hate America from the bottom of their heart." A Hezbollah official in Lebanon wrote it off as a "sermon," and one of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt called it "public relations."⁶⁵

But the man-on-the-street was swept up. "I didn't expect him to go this far," said a driver for an Egyptian government agency, Tarek Ali, 44. "He really seems to want to move forward." A communications worker in Baghdad, Ahmed Abdullah, 45, said, "This is the first time I've seen a U.S. president speaking like this." Even a spokesman for Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Ahmed Yusef, though he had "a lot of reservations," felt that "what he said about Islam was great. What he said about Palestinian suffering and a Palestinian state was great."⁶⁶

In speaking so closely about the Holocaust and the "intolerable" Palestinian occupation, Obama seemed "to draw an equivalence between Jewish and Palestinian suffering," saying they are "two peoples with legitimate aspirations, each with a painful history that makes compromise elusive."⁶⁷ For Aryeh Eldad, a right wing member of Israel's Knesset, this was "a shocking parallel between the destruction of European Jewry and the suffering that the Arabs of Israel brought upon themselves when they declared war on Israel." But another listener, Eyad el Sarraj, a Palestinian psychiatrist in Gaza, thought he heard echoes of African-American subjugation: "He compared Palestinians under Israeli occupation with slaves. This was powerful. He made everyone feel close and at home."

Official Israeli response was muted, saying the speech could be "the opening of a new era" without making reference to its stinging rebuke of settlements and labeling of the occupation "intolerable." However, respected commentator Gideon Levy, writing in *Haaretz*, asserted, "No one can ignore the speech given by Barack Obama...who spoke, believe it or not, about security not only for Israelis but also for Palestinians; who said that all the settlements are illegal; who called for nuclear disarmament of the entire region. All are sensational messages, headlines whose significance cannot be exaggerated." Levy spoke with continuing amazement that Obama had chastised Holocaust deniers in the heart of the Arab world and spoke of the rights of women and Copts. "This is the thinking of a great leader," Levy said, "who walked with wisdom and sensitivity between the Holocaust and the Nakba, between Israelis and Palestinians, between Americans and Arabs, between

Christians, Jews, and Muslims.” He imagined Obama’s “complete opposite” as “George Bush the Terrible.”⁶⁸

Uri Avnery, the Israeli columnist and former member of the Knesset, thought the 55-minute speech “not only wiped away the eight years of George Bush, but also much of the preceding decades from World War II on. The American ship has turned—not with the sluggishness everyone would have expected, but with the agility of a speedboat.” Avnery spared no words in saying how revolutionary Obama’s speech was, that it contained implicit rebukes to “racist demagogues” such as Avigdor Lieberman, part of Netanyahu’s cabinet, whose solutions to the Palestinian problem “might have been conceived in Nuremburg.”

“The Garden of Eden is no more,” wrote Avnery, using his own Biblical metaphors. “Whether the implications will become clear quickly or slowly—the direction is obvious. If we continue on our path, we will become a leper colony.” Avnery also thought the speech had stopped the resistant Israeli leadership:

The era of *foile shtik* [Yiddish for sneaky tricks] is over. The sly dishonesty of a Shimon Peres, the guileful deceits of an Ehud Olmert, the sweet talking of a Bibi Netanyahu—all these belong to the past. The Israeli people must now decide: whether to follow the right-wing government towards an inevitable collision with Washington, as the Jews did 1,940 years ago when they followed the Zealots into a suicidal war with Rome—or to join Obama’s march to a new world.⁶⁹

The *Washington Post* reacted to the speech in the quixotic, suspicious way that has become its norm in recent years with a rather parochial, protective-of-Israel editorial: “Mr. Obama’s initiative will fail if Israel’s compliance with U.S. demands becomes a stick by which Muslims measure the ‘new beginning’ he offered.” The *Post* cautioned against diverting efforts into “the narrow alley of the Mideast ‘peace process.’”⁷⁰

Al Jazeera, which might be termed the voice of the Arab mainstream, played sound bites of Obama’s speech throughout the day, including, intriguingly, Obama’s call to Hamas to recognize Israel.

The Cairo speech had immediate effects in the region which were anything but narrow. Within days, in a parliamentary election in Lebanon, Hezbollah lost its bid for dominance. Of 128 seats, 68 were won by a coalition of Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Druze, whereas a Hezbollah-led alliance won 57. Paul Salem, a director of the Beirut-based Carnegie Middle East Center, felt the Obama speech may have helped the winning side in that it is no longer a liability to be in tune with the United States: “It reinforces a kind of reasonable rather than radical situation in the region.” Voter turnout was conspicuously higher, as well—52 percent, up from 46 percent in 2005.⁷¹

Much was made of Israeli president Benjamin Netanyahu’s acceptance of a

Palestinian state a week after Obama's speech, the first time, it was said, he had ever done so (though Israeli leaders before him have accepted such a state for 20 years of rocky, inconclusive peacemaking). But for settlers, Bibi had nothing but warm words: "Settlers are not the enemy of the nation and are not the enemy of peace," he said, again insisting that the new Palestinian state be demilitarized, allow Israeli warplanes overflight rights, and contain Jerusalem as a united capital of Israel.⁷²

The day after Obama's speech a little-known political appointment was made in its spirit: Kareem Shora, national executive director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) was sworn in as a member of the Homeland Security Advisory Council by DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano. This was a first for the Arab American community and a fitting rebuke to the abuses of the Bush-created Patriot Act.

However, the most portentous ripple effect, at least in the short run, of Obama's speech may have been the reaction to the Iranian presidential election of June 21. Although President Ahmadinejad ostensibly won by a two-to-one margin of the popular vote, the opposition, led by candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, took to the streets in protest, insisting the election was rigged or subject to fraud. Around 15 people were killed in rioting as they faced a vicious crackdown.⁷³ Such open, angry rebellion against the Iranian theocracy has not been seen since its inception 30 years ago. Many were comparing the protests to those that brought down the Shah. Though hardly the cause of the anger, Obama's speech directly criticized despotism and repeatedly earmarked human rights, including the right of assembly. Obama himself pleaded with the authorities to allow the dissent and halt the violent crackdown.

Whether riding a wave in Cairo or setting it in motion, Obama's epochal speech ensured that the Middle East was not going to be the same, and that America's dealings with it were changing significantly. However humble he was about the effects of one speech on decades of turmoil ("No single speech can eradicate years of mistrust"),⁷⁴ there was no mistaking who would be leading the charge towards what Harold Meyerson calls "one of the planet's most venerable and dangerous disputes."⁷⁵

III

Now that he had put himself and his country on the line with promises of powerful action in the capital of the most populous country in the Arab world, what action would Obama take? Where, indeed, would the inmates of Guantanamo finally end up? Would there be a "torture" inquest? How to find common ground with Iran after the violent suppression of opposition forces? How to effect a Middle East nuclear-free zone? Would we lead with our aid or military in Afghanistan?

Most importantly, what concrete steps would he take to stop Israeli settlements?

The logic of Obama's Cairo address and the subsequent snub by President Netanyahu asking for even more concessions from Palestinians than previous Israeli leaders leads to an inevitable conclusion. Barring a change in Israeli leadership either literal or heartfelt, the United States is on a collision course with Israel, the so-called "red zone" the *Post* spoke of. Whether that collision is soft or hard—indeed, what tools the United States uses to confront Israel with life-changing choices—is yet unknown. But unless Obama's words are meaningless and Israel's occupation is actually tolerable, then you have to show how you will not tolerate it.

This must lead inevitably to the withdrawing of favors. Israel has gotten used to unparalleled largess over the past half century from the United States—estimated at over \$100 billion since 1967—and it will not be easy to remove it, even part by part. It won't be easy for its citizens to get used to a curtailment of services, either, and they are going to be angry. Some of that anger may play out against America, but inevitably the Israeli government is going to take most of the blame. Something will have to give (or someone—many think the first to go will be Netanyahu himself). The administration is already talking with Ehud Barak, the Labor Party leader and defense minister, who might form a new government if Netanyahu falls.⁷⁶ At the same time, Obama may approach Israel with what might be termed "incentive sanctions" that involve, for example, a cutting of aid until settlements are dismantled and then a tripling of aid when they are, or at least when an agreement to do so is inked. This might mean a loss of \$3 billion a year to gain, say, \$10 billion. Not a bad deal, and not a bad incentive, if Israelis can be made to keep their eyes on the prize.

The notion of tough action with the major parties, especially Israel, has been in the air much of the past year, and it has come from some surprising quarters. In a recent against-the-grain book about his 20 years of intimate involvement in Arab-Israeli peace negotiations, *The Much Too-Promised Land*,⁷⁷ Aaron David Miller argues that a combination of Carter's relentless devotion and George Bush Sr.'s toughness (as noted above, he once withheld loan guarantees to get Israel to halt settlement activity) is what is needed now more than ever. Clintonian "empathy," which Obama has, is not enough and will be scorned by the major players given what little that empathy produced after Oslo. A Jewish American himself, Miller urges,

The president must speak openly and honestly to Congress, and particularly to the organized American Jewish and American-Arab communities, about the relationship between America's national interest in Arab-Israeli peacemaking and security...To ignore or address ineffectively an issue that fuels so much rage and anger against us is irresponsible in the extreme.

He insists that the president “[put] some teeth into a policy [or] there’s absolutely no possibility of success.” This means, he says, “imposing costs—political, moral, and financial—on each side to dissuade them from their unilateral actions.” It will not work, as Miller puts it, to “love Israel to death” or encourage it as a “cult,” or as columnist Thomas Friedman wrote, to hold off “drawing red lines when Israel does reckless things that are also not in America’s interests, like building settlements all over the West Bank.”⁷⁸

So what does the action phase look like?

A pit bull for peace, Obama continues sending George Mitchell to the region, telling him not to desist until there is a durable peace agreement, even if it takes three years—the rest of his term. Offices are staffed in Foggy Bottom and Jerusalem with the best people available, as many Arab Americans as Jewish Americans, and experts from every part of the compass, from economic to literary. He is ready to dispatch the Pope for the convening of final status talks between the belligerents to underscore the seriousness of this moment in history.

He tries positive incentives first to get the Israelis to publicly declare a halt to settlements—such as a promise of trade or overflight rights from certain Arab states, things Mitchell apparently has already begun to float. If these don’t make Israel budge, he tries certain non-pecuniary disincentives, including curtailment of intelligence sharing and joint maneuvers of U.S.-Israeli armed forces, a halt to visas or immigration for Israelis to the United States, or the revoking of dual citizenship. Rahm Emanuel, the White House Chief of Staff, could ceremoniously revoke his own dual citizenship. This may not be as far-fetched as it sounds—when Emanuel’s father, a former member of the Israeli terrorist organization the Irgun made some blithe remarks about Arab floor swabbers after Obama’s election (something he was sure his son would not become), Emanuel the son chastised the father for racist remarks, and disassociated himself and his entire family from them. One senior White House official indicated that Emanuel has had it with settlements, characterizing the Chief of Staff’s approach with Israelis as “You’re doing it on your own dime. We don’t want our credibility to be compromised as you work out your domestic politics. We’re not going to pay for that one.”⁷⁹

Another intriguing means of leverage might just be the simple truth about Israeli nuclear weapons, something Israel itself has been chary to reveal. This might involve being intelligent about intelligence, for a change. Obama could hold a press conference, announce that we are fully aware of 200 Israeli nuclear bombs, and call upon Israel to sign onto the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and open its Dimona reactor et al. to the inspections of the International Atomic Energy Agency. The United States can suggest a convening of tripartite disarmament talks with Middle East and Indian subcontinent states with nuclear weapons, such as Pakistan and India. It offers to join these talks and draw down its own arsenals,

in concert with Russia and the Europeans. Iran going nuclear is thus headed off at the pass. But of course, Israel gets a deadline for this.

Additionally, the State Department could strongly insist on the extradition of two former Jewish Defense League members who are hiding in an Israeli settlement on the West Bank, Keith Fuchs and Andy Green. Both are suspects in the assassination of Alex Odeh in Los Angeles in 1985, when he was West Coast Director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.⁸⁰

If none of this proves catalytic, as Rahm Emanuel understands, money enters the picture. There are several ways to use financial leverage, as Aaron Miller calls it. One is indirect, the other direct.

One kind of indirect financial leverage might be revoking tax-exempt status for American organizations that raise funds that are used to construct or expand Israeli settlements in the West Bank, such as the Brooklyn-based nonprofit Hebron Fund.⁸¹ According to a National Public Radio report, more than half of West Bank settlements get direct or indirect funding from tax-exempt evangelical Christian groups, such as the Colorado-based Christian Friends of Israeli Communities.⁸² Another kind of indirect financial leverage is raising tariffs on U.S.-Israel trade. The Justice Department could also file suits against U.S. companies that sell building materials to Israelis constructing settlements in the West Bank, on the grounds that such sales aid and abet the violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits the settling of territories seized by force.

Direct leverage involves anything from a partial aid cut to a total aid cut or partial U.S. sanctions (or boycott) to total U.S. and even global sanctions.

On their return from visiting Gaza on February 19, 2009, Representatives Keith Ellison (D-MN) and Brian Baird (D-WA) said at a Congressional briefing, "Because our own security and integrity are at stake, U.S. aid [to Israel] should be linked to these changes [in Israeli behavior sought by the Obama Administration]."⁸³ Baird indicated in an e-newsletter on his website concerning foreign affairs that the United States has "the right, indeed the responsibility to, in some manner, relate our aid to our principles."⁸⁴ And in a recent conversation with this author, Representative Baird noted, "I think it necessary that the United States include in its message [to Israel] the possible reduction in U.S. aid if settlements continue."⁸⁵

In 1980, the first and last time the U.S. Senate ever voted on an aid cut to Israel over settlements, Senator Adlai Stevenson suggested a small cut commensurate with what Israel was spending to construct them—\$150 million at the time. (His amendment was defeated, 85-7, but one of the abstainers was current Vice President, then U.S. Senator Joseph Biden.)⁸⁶ Undoubtedly, settlements are worth a lot more today and cost a lot more to maintain. That figure could be determined and curtailed. One *Haaretz* observer believes, barring a freeze, Obama "is likely" to cut the current cost of settlements from U.S. loan guarantees for absorbing Soviet Jews: \$1.3 billion (out of \$10 billion).⁸⁷

Another way to come at this in tune with Obama's scrupulous evenhandedness would be to cut off aid to all three major parties to the conflict until peace is obtained: Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Lebanon. Again, a promise of triple that aid could be made to all three countries—no small amount for a newly birthed Palestine and a Lebanon that has been destroyed three times in 24 years by Israel and its own civil war.

For leverage on Hamas and Hezbollah, Obama must keep Mitchell and his crew in dialogue simultaneously with Syria and Iran (Mitchell has made repeated—and promising—trips to Damascus already, and held secret talks with the Iranians—also promising—in New York City in May 2009). He guarantees them normalization of diplomatic ties and economic aid if the former agrees to recognize Israel in exchange for the Golan Heights and the latter cuts ties with Hezbollah. Furthermore, in the wake of an Israeli signed treaty with the Palestinians to withdraw from the West Bank and establish the Palestinian state, he elicits acceptance of Israel by Iran. (Obama uses as leverage with Israel a promise from Iran for just such acceptance—meaning relentless discussion with the Iranians.) He exacts a similar promise from Hamas—perhaps Jimmy Carter could be brought in as his contacts with Hamas are strong—in exchange for a power-sharing mechanism in the new Palestinian state and also for a forswearing of suicide bombing.

Obama finds some way of splitting Jerusalem (or giving it international status and protection under the United Nations) and giving the Palestinians help to resettle indigent refugees (a large number from camps in Lebanon) inside the new state, perhaps taking over the abandoned settlements and a much smaller, though not insignificant, amount of land inside Israel proper.

And how does Obama help Israel from falling into civil war over the settlements? Hussein Agha and Robert Malley have made a shrewd suggestion: bring the settlers into the negotiation. It sounds preposterous on the surface, but fully two-thirds of all settlement population (190,000) reside in suburban Jerusalem, which might be ceded, in part, to Israel in exchange for Israeli territory thickly populated by Arabs.

Might not settlers in flashpoint places like Hebron and Nablus be more amenable to an agreement if they were given free housing around Jerusalem with fellow settlers? Could they be coaxed into giving up their box houses under siege if given luxury condos along the sea in Haifa or Jaffa? Might it be possible for settlers to be dual citizens if they disarm and if Palestine guarantees their safety? Settlers have been ostracized from the peace process on the assumption that they are anti-peace, but couldn't this be tested by bringing at least some of them to the table?

In short, nothing is spared to lock this peace down, giving Israelis their first easy breath and Palestinians their first taste of real justice in half a century. But as

Agha and Malley have intimated, for that to be achieved, not to mention to truly take hold, “superimposing” a two-state solution won’t do. As they put it, “The Israeli-Palestinian conflict will have to be tackled within the 1967 boundaries. But it can be resolved only if it deals candidly with its 1948 genesis.” In brief, that means addressing core needs of both Jews and Palestinians in that afflicted land: the Jewish sense of perennial persecution and need for a place of historic safety and the recognition of and offering of rough justice for the historic indignities, dispossession, and yes, the Obamian “humiliation” Palestinians have been subjected to on a Job-like scale for half a century. Not really a blame game, but a sensitive and real redressing of historic suffering. To this end, not only should the settlers be brought to the table, but the Palestinian diaspora as well. That means just the opposite of Bill Clinton’s vision—bringing restitution and repatriation of refugees front and center. In fact, Agha and Malley suggest a second talk site for Obama—not Cairo, but a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. As they say, “well-worn recipes cannot work,” and “the time is for a clean break, in words, style, and approach.”⁸⁸

Obama stepped from the cauldron in Cairo having achieved an extraordinary break in attitude, reaching out to that sizable chunk of the Muslim world disillusioned with the United States to the point of hatred. Now the clock starts ticking. The future might unfold thus: Obama goes on television to update the American people on progress and on the issues. He overleaps the Israel Lobby by appealing directly, as FDR did in his fireside chats, to the people themselves. He also uses the newfound discontent with Israeli policy in Jewish American Congressmen, such as Representative Ackerman, to lobby inside the House and Senate to trigger, if need be, the aid diminishing lever. With the United States in deep financial distress, it shouldn’t be too hard to cut aid for a project in Israel that is against international law and that threatens world peace.

As a result, Obama expends his enormous capital in the service of this great effort for Middle East peace, which will do more to secure our country than a thousand Iraq wars. In doing so he puts himself in a harm’s way none of us can fathom.

Or, he lets the Israelis cow or bluff him and the latest suicide bomber throw him into despair—and he buckles to his own fear. More than a presidency will be stillborn. And our agony will grow.

ENDNOTES

1. Barack Obama, "Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Lessons from Iraq," speech given on October 12, 2007, Des Moines, Iowa. Available at http://www.barackobama.com/2007/10/12/lessons_from_iraq.php.
2. Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, Random House, 2004), ix.
3. *Ibid.*, x.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, xi.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Tom Peterkin, "Barack Obama's Private Prayer at Jerusalem Western Wall Subject of Publication Row," *Telegraph.co.uk* (July 25, 2008), available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/barackobama/2460192/Barack-Obama-private-prayer-at-Jerusalem-Western-Wall-subject-of-publication-row.html>.
10. Robert Samuelson, "Bad Future for Jobs?," *Washington Post* (September 7, 2009).
11. See Amnesty International, "Operation 'Cast Lead': 22 Days of Death and Destruction," (London: Amnesty International Publications, July 2009), 6.
12. David Grossman, "Israel Must Stop Fanning the Flames That Will Consume Us," *Washington Post* (January 25, 2009), B1-B5.
13. Caren Bohan and Andrea Shalal-Esa, "Obama Considers Mitchell as Mideast Envoy," *Reuters* (January 20, 2009).
14. James Besser, "Mitchell as Envoy Could Split Center," *Jewish Week* (January 21, 2009).
15. All quotes regarding Freeman from Mark Mazzetti and Helene Cooper, "Israel Stance Was Undoing of Nominee," *New York Times* (March 12, 2009).
16. Farah Stockman, "Relentless Player to Push for Palestinian State," *Boston Globe* (May 19, 2009).
17. Ian Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel's Control of a National Minority* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1980).
18. Ian Lustick, *Trapped in the War on Terror* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).
19. Farah Stockman, *op. cit.*
20. Quoted from Academy for Achievement interview, June 7, 2002. See Alex Altman, "Middle East Envoy George Mitchell," *Time* (January 22, 2009), available at www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1873532,00.html.
21. The transcript of Barack Obama's interview with *Al-Arabiya* is available at

- <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/01/27/65096.html>.
22. See David Johnston and Elisabeth Bumiller, "Obama's Plan for Closing Guantanamo Faces Legal and Logistical Hurdles," *New York Times* (July 14, 2009).
23. Peter Finn and Sandhya Somashekhar, "Obama Bows on Settling Detainees," *Washington Post* (June 12, 2009).
24. Jonathan Kaminsky, "Palau Deal Close for Uighur Guantanamo Detainees," *Miami Herald* (August 5, 2009).
25. "Judge Orders Guantanamo Detainee's Release," *Associated Press* (July 30, 2009).
26. Matthew Barakat, "American al-Qaida Sentenced to Life for Bush Plot," *Associated Press* (July 27, 2009).
27. See Laurel Fletcher and Eric Stover, *The Guantanamo Effect: Exposing the Consequences of U.S. Detention and Interrogation Practices* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009).
28. Steve Kroft interview with Barack Obama, *60 Minutes* (November 16, 2008).
29. Terry Moran, "Cheney Roars Back: The Nightline Interview During His Trip to Iraq," *ABC News* (December 18, 2005), available at <http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=1419206>; Michael Bowman, "Cheney Says America is Winning War on Terror" (June 19, 2006), available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/news/2006/06/sec-060619-voa02.htm>; Speech by Dick Cheney to the American Enterprise Institute (May 21, 2009), available at www.aei.org/speech/100050.
30. Michael Isikoff, "Extraordinary Measures," *Newsweek* (March 2, 2009).
31. Richard Cohen, "Torture? Prosecute Us, Too," *Washington Post* (January 27, 2009).
32. Eugene Robinson, "After the Torture Era," *Washington Post* (November 18, 2009).
33. Karen DeYoung, "Obama Sets Timetable for Iraq," *Washington Post* (February 28, 2009).
34. Anne E. Kornblut and Ann Scott Tyson, "Obama Lays Out Iraq Plans at N.C. Base," *Washington Post* (February 28, 2009).
35. Howard Schneider, "Israeli Spurns Criticism from Clinton," *Washington Post* (March 6, 2009).
36. Mustafa Barghouti, "Bibi and Barack," *Los Angeles Times* (May 18, 2009).
37. Debbie Menon, "Can Obama Escape Dominating Influence of AIPAC?," *Aljazeera Magazine* (May 8, 2009).
38. Tony Blair, "First Test for Obama in the Middle East," *Los Angeles Times* (May 18, 2009).
39. Howard Schneider, "Palestinians Discouraged by Meeting's Outcome,"

- Washington Post* (May 19, 2009).
40. Howard Schneider, "Netanyahu Hints at Palestinian Statehood," *Washington Post* (June 15, 2009).
 41. Scott Wilson, "Emphasis Differs for Obama, Netanyahu," *Washington Post* (May 19, 2009).
 42. David Bromwich, "New York Times Falsifies Obama-Netanyahu Meeting," *Huffington Post* (May 19, 2009), available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-bromwich/inew-york-timesi-falsifie_b_205201.html.
 43. Howard Schneider, op. cit.
 44. "Opening Bids," *Washington Post* editorial (May 20, 2009).
 45. Glenn Kessler and Howard Schneider, "U.S. Urges Israel to End Expansion," *Washington Post* (May 24, 2009). This piece showcased statements of six U.S. presidents on settlements, alongside the relentlessly increasing settlers' population. For example, when Jimmy Carter became the last president to specifically say the settlements were illegal (in 1980), their population was 61,500. Reagan, soft-pedaling the matter, saw settlements almost double in two years after he defeated Carter. By 2008, Israeli settlers on the West Bank numbered 479,500.
 46. Ibid.
 47. Ibid.
 48. Ibid.
 49. Ibid.
 50. Matti Friedman, "Israel Rebuffs US Call for Total Settlement Freeze," *Associated Press* (May 28, 2009).
 51. *Washington Post* editorial, February 12, 1980.
 52. David Ignatius, "Obama Tugs at the Settlement Knot," *Washington Post* (June 4, 2009).
 53. Shibley Telhami, "2009 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey," University of Maryland, with Zogby International Peace, Washington, D.C. (May 2009); Zogby International, "Arab Opinions on President Obama's First 100 Days: A 6-Nation Survey" (May 2009).
 54. Press Conference with Shibley Telhami, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C. (May 29, 2009).
 55. Jailan Zayan, "Don't Lecture Us: Arabs Tell Obama," *Agence FrancePresse* (June 3, 2009).
 56. Ibid.
 57. Hadeel al-Shalchi and Kari Laub, "Muslims Want Tangible Change on Mideast from Obama," *Associated Press* (May 31, 2009).
 58. Ibid.
 59. Maamoun Youssef, "Al-Qaida Criticizes Obama's Upcoming Cairo Speech," *Associated Press* (June 2, 2009).

60. Quotes in this paragraph from Hadeel al-Shalchi and Kari Laub, op. cit.
61. Anthony Shadid, "Obama Faces Chasm in Mideast," *Washington Post* (June 3, 2009).
62. Obama's speech in Cairo (June 4, 2009), available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/04/obama-speech-in-cairo-vid_n_211215.html.
63. Gregory Orfalea, *The Arab Americans: A History* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Press, 2006), 301.
64. Quoted in Rachel Zoll, "Obama Cites Quran, but Message is Interfaith," *Associated Press* (June 4, 2009).
65. Howard Schneider, "Muslims Seem Won Over by President; U.S. Adversaries Unmoved," *Washington Post* (June 5, 2009).
66. Quotes in this paragraph from Ibid.
67. Glenn Kessler and Jacqueline Salmon, "Using New Language, President Shows Understanding for Both Sides in Middle East," *Washington Post* (June 5, 2009).
68. Gideon Levy, "Obama Emerged in Cairo as True Friend of Israel," *Haaretz* (June 8, 2009).
69. Uri Avnery, "The Tone and the Music" (June 8, 2009), available at <http://zope.gush-shalom.org/home/en/channels/avnery/1244289868>.
70. "The Cairo Appeal," *Washington Post* editorial (June 5, 2009).
71. Hadeel al-Shalchi, "Pro-Western Bloc Beats Hezbollah in Lebanon Vote," *Associated Press* (June 8, 2009).
72. Josef Federman, "Netanyahu Endorses Palestinian Independence," *Associated Press* (June 14, 2009).
73. See Amnesty International, "Arrests and Killings Rise as Election Protests Grip Iran" (June 17, 2009), available at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/news/arrests-and-killings-rise-election-protests-grip-iran-20090617>.
74. Obama's speech in Cairo (June 4, 2009), op. cit.
75. Harold Meyerson, "Netanyahu Feels the Heat," *Washington Post* (June 17, 2009).
76. David Ignatius, "What a Freeze Can't Do," *Washington Post* (June 28, 2009).
77. Aaron David Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land: America's Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Bantam, 2008).
78. Thomas Friedman, "Obama and the Jews," *New York Times* (May 18, 2008).
79. David Ignatius, "What a Freeze Can't Do," op. cit.
80. Greg Krikorian, "Evidence Emerges in '85 Santa Ana Slaying," *Los Angeles Times* (October 11, 2007).
81. On March 27, 2009, the ADC filed complaints with the U.S. Treasury Department on just this matter. See "ADC Files Complaints with Treasury Department Against US Tax-Exempt Organization Raising Funds for West

- Bank Settlements,” American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee press release (March 27, 2009).
82. See Ronit Avni, “Want to Stop Israeli Settlements? Follow the Dollars,” *Washington Post* (June 28, 2009).
 83. See “Time to be a True Friend and Insist on Real Change in Israeli-Palestinian Relations,” available at www.baird.house.gov/images/stories/baird_ellison_gaza_final.pdf
 84. See “Foreign Affairs” at www.baird.house.gov/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=183&pop+1.
 85. Personal conversation with Representative Brian Baird, September 17, 2009. His complete on-the-record comments are as follows:

“There is cynicism in Israel that we really mean what we say about settlements. There is equal cynicism broadly in the Arab world about our willingness to act on this issue. There is, on the one hand, profound affection for our ideals, and on the other profound disillusionment over the discrepancy between our ideals and lack of action.

There is an enormous lack of awareness in the American people about basic issues in the Middle East. For example, the Arab peace initiative of 2002, which President Obama himself applauded in his Cairo speech this spring. One of my strongest supporters told me recently that Israel faces an existential threat from an Arab world that continues to deny its existence. And I told him that the Arab peace initiative of 2002, led by the Saudis, committed all Arab states to recognize Israel should a Palestinian state emerge on the West Bank and Gaza. He had no idea. He was amazed. But it’s on the record. And Iran is part of it, as well. Not only most people don’t know of this—most Members of Congress don’t. We have to correct this lack of critical information that can help us towards peace.

I think we in Congress have a strategic national security imperative to insist through a vigorous, sincere, and actionable initiative that all settlement expansion by Israel in the West Bank must stop. It is in our national security interest, it is critical to supporting the moderates on both the Israeli and Arab sides, it is important to Israel’s own security, and it is indispensable to a just and lasting peace.

Given the makeup of the current Israeli administration—including Avigdor Lieberman—given the inconsistent statements and inaction regarding settlement expansion, given the history since the Oslo peace process (of the earlier 1990s) of a doubling, if not tripling, of settlements in the Occupied

Territories, I think it necessary that the United States be clearly against expansion of settlements, and include in our message the possible reduction in U.S. aid if settlements continue.

I want to reiterate the reason: continued expansion of settlements is a clear obstacle to progress in peace, it hurts the Israeli peace camp, emboldens extremists on both sides, and ultimately endangers America's own domestic security. My first priority as a U.S. Congressman is the security of this country.

I don't think our stance on Israel caused September 11, but our not being a just broker has contributed in profound and dangerous ways to the elusiveness of peace in that region. One gets labeled 'anti-Israel,' but in my case nothing could be further from the truth. Israelis themselves understand this. The settlements undermine not just their security and embolden terrorism, but their essential core humanity is endangered. We're told what happens in Gaza is an 'Operation,' but it's really a bombing run. I've seen the damage with my own eyes."

86. Gregory Orfalea, op. cit., 232; See also his "No Money for Settlements—Stevenson Offers Amendment," *Focus* 3, no. 13 (July 1980). (*Focus* was published by the National Association of Arab Americans, Washington, D.C.)
87. Akiva Eldar, "U.S. Expected to Pressure Israel on Settlement Construction," *Haaretz* (February 15, 2009).
88. See Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, "Obama and the Middle East," *New York Review of Books* 56, no. 10 (June 2009).

OTHER CCAS PAPERS

The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam

Talal Asad (1986)

Islam, Jerusalem and the West

Walid Khalidi (1996)

Rethinking the Roots of Modern Science: Arabic Manuscripts in European Libraries

George Saliba (1997)

A Time to Reap: Thoughts on Calendars and Millennialism

Barbara Freyer Stowasser (2000)

A View on Islamic Economic Thought

Ibrahim M. Oweiss (2002)

A View from the Inside: Congressional Decisionmaking and Arab-Israeli Policy

David Dumke (2006)

Is the Maghreb the "Next Afghanistan"?: Mapping the Radicalization of the Algerian Salafi Jihadist Movement

Noureddine Jebnoun (2007)

Education, Human Development, and Arab Women: Progress, Dilemmas, and American Discourse

Fida Adely (2008)

Passing a Flaming Torch: The Middle Eastern Issues Confronting the Obama Administration

Rami G. Khouri (2009)

CCAS Occasional Papers are essays, lectures, research notes, and other items of interest to students, scholars, and friends of Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. The views expressed are solely those of the author.

For a complete list of CCAS Papers, see <http://ccas.georgetown.edu/research.cfm>

