

---



# Stuck in the Roundabout: The Perils of American Policy on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

DYLAN J. WILLIAMS

---

Many Jewish Americans noted with hope that the inspiring sight of thousands of peaceful demonstrators seeking greater opportunity and freedom in squares and streets across the Middle East was not obscured by smoke billowing from burning American or Israeli flags, nor banners denouncing Western powers or their Jewish ally. As the inimitable journalist Mona Eltahawy put it, “None of this is about Israel.... For once it’s not about you. Be happy it’s not about you.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet, as we celebrate the historic successes and honor the selfless sacrifices of those giving voice to our shared values in their own countries, the American pro-Israel community—and American Jews in particular—cannot help but wonder what this transformative process will mean for the homeland of the Jewish people, the State of Israel, to whose security and survival we have an unwavering commitment. Naturally, difficult questions arise: will a new Egyptian regime maintain its critical peace with Israel? Will more open elections bring extremist groups opposed to Israel’s

---

*Dylan J. Williams* is director of government affairs at J Street, and former counsel for Foreign Relations, Trade and Immigration to United States Senator Olympia Snowe (R-ME). He holds a law degree and bachelor’s degree in government from Cornell University.

---

existence into power? Will the tide of revolts wash away the moderate leadership of the Palestinian Authority?

All are valid inquiries, but another of equal, if not greater importance to Israel's long-term security and survival, is also being asked within the American Jewish community: what should be done about the Israeli-Palestinian peace process?

Contrary to long-held beliefs in American politics, the overwhelming majority of American Jews not only supports a two-state resolution to the conflict, but wants the

*Contrary to long-held beliefs in American politics, the overwhelming majority of American Jews not only supports a two-state resolution to the conflict, but wants the U.S. Government to assertively push the parties to achieve it.*

U.S. Government to assertively push the parties to achieve it. According to a 2010 election night survey of 1,000 American Jewish voters commissioned by J Street, 83 percent of American Jews want the administration to play "an active role in helping the parties to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict." More tellingly, however, 71 percent would still support active American leadership if it meant "publicly stating its disagreements" with both Israelis and Arabs, while 65 percent would still support

such leadership even if it meant "exerting pressure on both the Israelis and Arabs to make the compromises necessary to achieve peace."<sup>2</sup>

This data reflects a growing sense of urgency in the American pro-Israel community over the consequences of what Secretary of State Hillary Clinton—referencing previous statements by Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak and others—called "the inexorable mathematics of demography,"<sup>3</sup> which will see Arabs outnumber Jews in Israeli-controlled or garrisoned territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River within a generation. At that moment, Israel will have to choose between relinquishing its Jewish character by granting all Palestinians full political rights, or abandoning the Zionist and Jewish ideal of democracy by denying such rights to the new majority, inviting condemnation and, inevitably, isolation and sanction from the international community.

Either scenario is unacceptable to those who support Israel and its right to exist as a democratic homeland for the Jewish people. That is why our community was energized, twenty months before thousands of voices sounded from Cairo's Tahrir Square, by the voice of a single reformer filling a university hall elsewhere in Egypt's capital. In his June 2009 address on

American relations with the Muslim world, President Obama pledged to Israeli and Arab leaders that, in pursuit of a two-state resolution to their conflict, “America will align our policies with those who pursue peace, and say in public what we say in private to Israelis and Palestinians and Arabs... It is time for us to act on what everyone knows to be true.”<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, this would-be Middle East revolution never made it out of the roundabout, with the United States driving in circles, perpetuating the status quo in the conflict.

In March 2010, Israeli, announced the approval of new housing units for its citizens in occupied East Jerusalem during Vice President Biden’s visit, which triggered a diplomatic spat. The Obama administration ultimately backed down from its initially firm line (mirroring that of both Republican and Democratic predecessors), and offered only muted objections to continued Israeli settlement activity. It also acquiesced to a congressional letter that included a breathtakingly anti-transparent and undemocratic directive, stating that any differences between the United States and Israel “are best resolved quietly.”<sup>5</sup> The backsliding continued in subsequent months, with Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell’s team ceding press ink, senior staff, and, ultimately, influence to others within the administration.

This retreat doomed the president’s attempt to relaunch productive direct negotiations in September 2010. Whereas the Palestinian Authority has met each of the Israeli preconditions on negotiations (i.e., the eminently reasonable Quartet obligations to renounce violence as a means to achieve its objectives, recognize the State of Israel’s right to exist, and adhere to previous international agreements), .....

Israel has yet to meet the Palestinian precondition that it likewise comply with its existing international obligation to cease further settlement activity. President Obama’s new effort came toward the end of a partial, though laudable, ten-month slow-down in Israeli settlement activity, with the Palestinian Authority ultimately agreeing to nego-

*Israel has yet to meet the Palestinian precondition that it likewise comply with its existing international obligation to cease further settlement activity.*

.....  
 tiate despite the moratorium’s allowance of ongoing construction on public buildings and structures-in-progress in the West Bank settlements, as well as all Israeli projects in occupied East Jerusalem. Absent an American strategy to overcome the barrier to talks presented by settlement activity, the Palestinian Authority unsurprisingly found it politically untenable to

continue negotiations beyond the expiry of this ten-month slow-down. Even if PA leadership had been able to continue negotiations and maintain their legitimacy among Palestinians in the face of ongoing settlement activity, the lack of an American-backed settlement plan meant that the talks would amount to little more than a veneer of engagement while facts on the ground moved unrelentingly against a two-state resolution.

In the absence of American leadership, actors in the international community have taken matters into their own hands. Key South American countries, led by an increasingly influential Brazil, recognized Palestinian statehood late last year. Just days later, the twenty-seven foreign ministers of the European Union member states employed exceptionally precise

.....  
*Nowhere is the abdication  
of American leadership in  
resolving the conflict felt more  
keenly than in the American  
Jewish community.*  
.....

diplomatic language to open the door to recognizing Palestinian statehood in September 2011 by narrowly stating their “readiness to contribute to a negotiated solution on all final status issues *within the 12 months set by the Quartet*”<sup>6</sup> (emphasis added). The Palestine Papers’ public obliteration of the canard that Palestinian Authority leadership is

unwilling to make the necessary concessions for peace will only put additional pressure on European leaders to take a firmer stance on Israel, and put the United States and Israel further at odds with world opinion.

Nowhere is the abdication of American leadership in resolving the conflict felt more keenly than in the American Jewish community. Frustration over a lack of progress toward a two-state resolution may explain why 69 percent of American Jewish voters support some form of freeze on settlement construction in the West Bank. This also explains why 71 percent of American Jewish voters “agree with the President’s policies” concerning the conflict, while only 33 percent “like the way he is executing these policies.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet, if American Jews are disappointed by the timidity of American leadership in resolving the conflict under President Obama, they are downright horrified by the conservative alternatives. In attempting to pander to the American Jewish community, conservatives have made sloppy, if not offensive, assumptions about Jewish American views on the conflict. Making the apparently mandatory pre-presidential campaign trip to Israel in late January, once-and-future presidential candidate Mike Huckabee—who has previously expressed opposition to a two-state resolution<sup>8</sup> and claimed that “there’s no such thing as a Palestinian”<sup>9</sup>—abrogated the policies of the Reagan and both Bush administrations by opining that Israeli

settlers should be able to build anywhere in “the place that God gave them.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, former Alaska Governor and Vice Presidential Candidate Sarah Palin added an unseemly eschatological bent to her defense of Israeli settlement activity, claiming in November 2009 that ongoing settlement construction was necessary because “more and more Jewish people will be flocking to Israel in the days and weeks and months ahead.”<sup>11</sup>

Such extreme and unproductive views are unlikely to attract American Jewish voters, a largely progressive group already alienated by conservatives’ domestic policy positions. Indeed, 78 percent of Jewish midterm election voters had an unfavorable view of Sarah Palin, while the Tea Party Movement and Republican Party earned 71 percent and 70 percent unfavorable rates, respectively.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, American Jews face a difficult reality: there is no viable means to ensure the eternal existence of Israel as a democratic homeland for the Jewish people other than a two-state resolution to the conflict; there is no viable means to achieve a two-state resolution other than through assertive American leadership; and there is currently no viable person to supply that assertive American leadership other than President Obama, who has been loath to do so.

Yet, a clear path to achieving two states for two peoples—one which quite literally winds its way around the seemingly intractable issue of settlements—exists for the president’s taking. As J Street has advocated, the United States should engage both parties without delay in a time-limited exercise to establish border and security arrangements *en route* to a final, comprehensive agreement ending the conflict.

The border agreement should delineate a Palestinian state on the equivalent of 100 percent of the land beyond the 1967 Green Line with one-to-one land swaps of contiguous areas in Israel. These borders could allow for as many as three-quarters of the existing settlements to be part of Israel’s internationally recognized sovereign territory. The agreement should also address the border within Jerusalem, with the exception of the Old City and its very immediate environs. If the parties are unable to reach an agreement on these discreet issues in the specified time period, the United States should present a proposal to both sides—for their yes-or-no decision—that adheres to the above parameters, with the support of the Quartet for Middle East Peace and other international stakeholders.

With the contours of a border set, the stumbling block of settlements would be rendered moot, as the citizens of Israel and the Palestinian state-to-be would be certain that they were building in their own country, and not that of the other. Agreeing upon security arrangements that address the

full range of threats Israel faces from Iran, from Hezbollah, and from within Palestinian lands would give Israelis the confidence that there is a U.S.-led international commitment to their long-term security as Israel pulls back from control of the territories. These historic, but eminently attainable, accomplishments would create the positive momentum and trust necessary to address the remaining final status issues as part of a comprehensive agreement ending the conflict once and for all.

Thousands of people across the Middle East have bravely risked everything to move their revolution from the roundabout to reality. It is time for President Obama, with the vast majority of Jewish Americans behind him, to show a modicum of that will by taking concrete action toward ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict now. ■

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Mona Eltahawy, remarks at J Street National Conference, "History before Our Eyes: Broader Implications of Democracy Movement in the Arab World," Washington, DC, February 27, 2011, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3U0QRR3ELxw>> (accessed April 14, 2011).
- 2 National Survey of American Jews, J Street, November 2, 2010, <[http://jstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/images/J\\_Street\\_National\\_Survey\\_Results.pdf](http://jstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/images/J_Street_National_Survey_Results.pdf)> (accessed April 6, 2011). [DISCLOSURE NOTE: Jim Gerstein, a principal of Gerstein Agne Strategic Communications, which conducted the survey, was a founding member of J Street's Board of Directors. The survey methodology, composition of the sample, and the full question wording for our polls of American Jews are publicly available on our website for scrutiny.]
- 3 Daniel Dombey, "Survival of Israel is at Stake, Says Clinton," *Financial Times*, March 23, 2010.
- 4 Department of State, "Remarks by President Barack Obama from Cairo University, Cairo," June 4, 2009, <<http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2009/125989.htm>> (accessed April 14, 2011).
- 5 See Natasha Mozgovaya, "Nearly 300 Congress members declare commitment to 'unbreakable' U.S.-Israel bond," *Haaretz*, March 25, 2010.
- 6 Council of the European Union, Press Release, December 13, 2010, "3058th Council Meeting," <[http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/118456.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/118456.pdf)> (accessed April 14, 2011).
- 7 National Survey of American Jews.
- 8 Aron Heller, "Huckabee says no Palestinian state in West Bank," *Associated Press*, February 1, 2011.
- 9 Spencer Ackerman, "Huckabee in 2007: 'There's No Such Thing as a Palestinian,'" *The Washington Independent*, August 18, 2009.
- 10 Josh Lederman, "Huckabee: Israel can build in West Bank, Jerusalem," *Associated Press*, January 31, 2011.
- 11 Alan Goldberg and Katie Thomson, "Palin: Obama Wrong on Israeli, Afghan Policy," *ABC News*, November 17, 2009.
- 12 National Survey of American Jews.