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**The American University in Cairo
School of Global Affairs and Public Policy
Department of Public Policy and Administration**

A Project Submitted to the

Public Policy and Administration Department

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Global Affairs

**THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION AND THE ISRAELI-
PALESTINIAN CONFLICT
EXPLORING THE IDEATIONAL AND STRUCTURAL
FACTORS**

Submitted by

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Supervised by Professor Ibrahim Awad

Spring 2018

*To my grandmother,
For her love and support*

“Indeed, *hope and optimism are critical components of the innocence* that is the hallmark of America's engagement with the Middle East. Why would we bother to try to transform such a troubled region unless we somehow believed we could, and should? But the dark side of that innocence is a naïveté bred of ignorance and arrogance that generate a chronic inability to comprehend.”

Martin Indyk (2009). “Innocent Abroad,” p. 7.

Abstract

This study discusses the Obama Administration's Policy toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from 2009 to 2017. It is an attempt to explain the change in the Administration's approach to the peace process, and the reasons for its inability to achieve a breakthrough in resuming the negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis. Deploying the foreign policy analysis, the study explores the main drivers and outcomes of the American policy concerning the conflict, and explains its development over the eight years of Obama's presidency that started with high expectations on resolving the conflict and ended with prevailing disappointment and fear of the end of the peace process itself.

Keywords:

Palestine; Israel; Foreign policy; Obama; The Peace Process; Conflict Resolution; Arab- Israeli Conflict; The Middle East.

Table of Content

- I. Introduction
- II. Background of the US and the Peace Process
- III. The Theoretical Framework
 - a. The Research Questions
 - b. Conceptual Framework
 - c. Methodology
 - d. Literature Review
- IV. Obama's Perception of the Conflict:
 - a. The Evolution of Obama's Perception of the Conflict
 - b. The Abortive Resumption of the Peace Process
 - c. Obama Embraces the Israeli Narrative
- V. Structural Factors:
 - a. Chaotic Security Situation in the Middle east
 - b. The Effect of the US-Israel Relations
- VI. Obama's Too little Too Late Legacy
 - a. Kerry's Warmed-over Diplomacy
 - b. The UNSC 2334: The Desperate Move
- VII. Conclusions: Implications for The Future

I. Introduction

In consistency with much of its legacy, Obama's Administration policy Palestine/Israel is highly indicative to decisive changes in the American policy in the Middle East and beyond. Whereas Obama started his tenure as a great believer in the peace process and the two state solution, showing great interest in solving the century-long conflict (Miller, 2010), he ended up with disappointment and rhetorical emphasis on the broad lines of the American vision of the conflict settlement (Thrall, 2017; Miller 2015).

For several observers (Thrall, 2016; Elgindy, 2016), Obama, unlike any of his predecessors, has no legacy regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. For example, he did not introduce a comprehensive agreement between Israel and its neighbors like the one Carter (1977-1981) introduce. Nor did he put parameters of solution, like those of Clinton. Even his former predecessor, George W. Bush introduced the widely accepted formula for peace, the two-state solution. Although he is among the few American presidents who have a proper knowledge of the facts of the conflict and more balanced worldview of the complex relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors, Obama refrained from making any constructive plan to push the peace process forward, and the measures taken by his Administration have been merely diplomatic procedures without real content no matter what its direction. And John Kerry- the Secretary of State- fueled most of the short-lived efforts in 2013-2014.

The case of the Obama Administration, therefore, requires a closer look at the reasons for this failure in brokering peace, and achieving considerable inroads, that a future solution can be built on. The study suggests that this failure can be explained by the interaction between two sets of factors; the ideational ones and the structural ones. By the former we means the norms and ideas that shaped Obama's perceptions of the conflict; and by the latter we mean the effects of the established context in which the Obama Administration was operating; that included the chaotic security situation in the Middle East, and the nature of the US-Israeli relations during the Administration tenure. The study also assumes that, the overwhelming effects of the those structures led to the downgrading of peace in Palestine as a primary item on the Administration's agenda, and constrained its movement for peace over its two terms.

The study is an attempt to fill the gap left in the historiography of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by providing an analytical narrative of the Obama Administration contribution to the peace process over the two-term tenure. While it aims at explaining the change of the American policy toward the conflict during that era, it is not meant to serve as a counterfactual history of the peace process. Rather, it seeks elaboration of the changes in the American role in relation to the shifts of ideas and the ongoing change of the American position in the region. By doing so, the study sheds light on the implications of these changes on the future of the peace process as a whole and the American role in it in particular, as legitimate doubts arise over both.

II. Background

Two years before Obama took office as the new president of the USA in January 2009, the peace process negotiations between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority were halted. However, the coming of the democratic president provided a new hope for both sides in resuming the peace process based on his profile as a knowledgeable ex-activist, and a president with a new approach and agenda with the Muslim world. In turning his promises of peace into a mission of peace, Obama adopted the American playbook of the peace process, with the two-state solution at its core (Thrall, 2016; Elgindy 2016; Pressman, 2016; Shlaim, 2016).

The peace process was launched in the Madrid Conference in the 30th of October 1991 initiated by G. H. Bush Administration. Nevertheless, it did not manage to turn its outputs into solid basis for peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, which was provided instead by the Norwegian government through the secret talks between the leftist Israeli government presided by Rabin and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). These talks resulted in the Declaration of Principles or Oslo Peace Agreement in 1993 which has since then been the agreed upon referential framework of the peace process as it was recognized by the international community at large and adopted by the US government (Pan, 2005; USDS; BBC, 2013).

The primary breakthrough of the Oslo Agreement is that it created official mutual recognition between the two sides; whereas the PLO recognized the right of Israel in existence, the latter recognized the PLO as the representatives of Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. Furthermore, the Agreement established the Palestinian Authority as a political and administrative body for the Palestinian people, and divided the control over the occupied territories between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the Palestinian Authority (PA) until a final agreement is reached (Pan, 2005; BBC, 2013).

The Oslo Accords set up issues to be negotiated as permanent status issues, which are Jerusalem, the borders, the refugees, the settlements, and water. The Accords state “It is understood that these negotiations shall cover remaining issues,

including: Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security arrangements, borders, relations and co-operation with other neighbors, and other issues of common interest." (Oslo Accords, 1993)

Radicals on both sides opposed the Oslo accords: the Jihadist Islamists, and prominent figures within the PLO on the Palestinian side and the far-right wing Zionists on the Israeli side. Slow progress was achieved through the US-sponsored negotiations, especially following the assassination of Rabin in 1995. The Oslo Accords proved to be based on shaky grounds particularly because of the PA failure in consolidating its legitimacy among the Palestinians, and the collapse of Camp David talks between Arafat and Barak in 2000 (BBC, 2013). The disappointment among Palestinians reached its peak in the second *intifada* (uprising) that erupted by Ariel Sharon visit to *Al Haram Alsharif*- a deliberate act from the Israeli hawkish figure to subvert what he believed Barak promised Arafat in Camp David- The Palestinian Intifada was characterized by the eruption of violence and resulted in an actual end of the peace process and Sharon's reinvasion of the West Bank to liquidate Arafat's authority.

Towards the end of his presidency, the Democrat president Bill Clinton declared his parameters for the resolution to the conflict, offering a plan to deal with the most protracted issues of negotiations. They were approved in the Taba Summit in January 2001 in which the idea of the land swaps was the first introduced. In light of violence in the Palestinian occupied territories and the massive civilian losses among Palestinians, the Arab states led by Saudi Arabia adopted the Arab Peace Initiative in March 2002, according to which Israel was asked to withdraw from all the occupied Arab territories, and the refugees were given the right to return or to be compensated. Consequently, the Arab Countries affirm that the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, and would enter into a peace agreement with Israel, and provide security for all the states of the region, and would establish normal relations with Israel in the context of this comprehensive peace. (Pan, 2005; BBC, 2013).

The George W. Bush Administration adopted Clinton Parameters. Moreover, it endorsed the two-state solution, as Bush proposed the creation of a "peaceful and democratic Palestinian State" alongside Israel in June 2002. However, excluding

Arafat, Bush set reforming the PA, dismantling the militant groups, and electing a new leader as conditions for resuming the peace talks based on the two-state solution. Moreover, the Bush Administration engaged its efforts into the International Quartet that composed of the US, the EU, the UN and Russia, which initiated the Road Map on 19 November 2003 in the form of the UNSC 1515 (Mohamed, 2015; Otterman, 2005).

Based on Bush's endorsement of the two-state solution, the Road Map proposed a phased timetable, highlighting the establishment of security before a permanent settlement (Mohamed, 2015). It is designed to create confidence-building measures, leading to final status talks. The Road Map paved the way to the peace talks in Annapolis Conference in 2007 in which the two parties, headed by Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas, agreed on the current formulation of the two-state solution. Moreover, a joint understanding was issued according to which both parties were to engage in talks until the end of 2008 reaches a full peace deal. The talks came to a dramatic halt when a military confrontation took place between the IDF and Hamas in Gaza strip, the end of Olmert's term in office in 2009, and the coming of the right-wing government of Netanyahu that has been adherent to the settler policy (BBC, 2013).

III. The Theoretical Framework

a. The Research Questions

The primary goal of the study is to attempt the question: what are the reasons for the failure of the Obama Administration in brokering peace between the two parties of the conflict.

Specific research questions:

1. How did the Obama Administration approach the conflict over its tenure?
2. How did the Administration's perception of the conflict and the peace process change during its two-term tenure?
3. What was the role of norms and ideas in shaping Obama's policy?
4. To which extent did the post 2011 security situation in the Middle East affect the Administration's policy toward the conflict?
5. To what extent did the established US-Israeli relations affect the Administration's choices for peace?

b. Conceptual Framework

At large the study draws on the debate between the neo realist (structuralist) and the constructivist perspectives of international politics (see Wendt 1987). This debate can be cited as the agent-structure problem in the international relations theory. This debate illustrates the interactive relationship between the individual actors (policy makers) within the state, as the primary actor in international politics, and the structure of the system that constitutes the objective setting of relations, distribution of power and factual context that actors (agents) are performing within. This debate can be summarized as follows:

- The Neo-realists (structuralists) empathize on the role of structure in dictating the behavior in international politics. By "structure" they mean the way the units are ordered in relation to one another (Cepik and Brancher 2017, 157).

According to this definition, the world system has several structures where the distribution of power is relative and shaped by various factors. But for Kenneth Waltz, the main theorist of neo-realism in seminal work *A Theory of International Politics* (1979), anarchy is the main structure of the world system. There is no central authority. In this ontologically anarchic position, states are seeking survival through advancing their national interests. Yet national interests are defined by the interaction of the domestic actors since the state is not a coherent unit (Whyte (2012; Jacobsen 2013).

- The constructivists, on the contrary, stress the social, ideational and inter-subjective character of world politics (Behravis, 2011). They agree on the importance of structure, especially anarchy, yet they emphasize the role of perception in shaping the impact of anarchy. As Alexander Wendt (1998) put it “Anarchy is what states make of it.”
- Hence, structures and national interests are not predetermined factors, they are being “constructed” in the process of interaction between the agents and the factual context, and This agency is shaped by the actors’ norms, values, ideas, self-perceptions and identities;
- Therefore, neither the structure nor the agent’s perceptions are static; they change in the course of interaction (Katzenstein in Theys 2017, 39).

The study assumes that Obama’s policy regarding the conflict was the product of this interaction between notions and the impact structures. Obama, as an agent, and his administration, developed some notions of the conflict before and during their tenure. While the administration tried in several occasions to act actively to broker peace, motivated by the centrality of peace to the American national interest, it was defied by the chaotic security situation in the Middle East, which redefined the American national interest in the region, and the relationship between the US and Israel. Both factors represented a specific dynamic setting of power relations that shaped the agents’ perceptions and preferences.

c. Methodology

In answering the research questions, the study uses qualitatively correlated methods, foreign policy analysis and the comparative historical analysis.

1. **Foreign policy analysis:** a method with several models. For the purpose of this study, our analysis is going to deploy discourse analysis and the model of bureaucratic politics.
 - a) **Discourse Analysis:** this tool is primarily a constructivist approach used to analyze the perceptions of policy-makers regarding specific issues or structures. It assumes that when the policy maker repeats some ideas in several settings to different audiences, then they are trying to persuade the interlocutors of their positions. It also presumes that these policy makers are not using language in different settings as a smokescreen to hide to their obscure real intentions (Daddo, 2015).
 - b) **The Bureaucratic Politics Model:** it fits both the neo-realist and constructivist perspectives, since it perceives the state as a framework of non-unitary bureaucratic bodies whose interactions define its foreign policy. In addition to the emphasis on the nature of the political system and its social and economic domestic environment, this model assumes that “foreign policy decisions are the result of a rational process in which the various agencies, departments, and offices that collectively constitute the government jointly serve an agreed-upon national interest.” (Breuning, 2007, p. 95)

Applying these two models to the American foreign policy during the Obama Administration, the study will focus on analyzing the discourse of President Obama, the Administration’s officials, and the peace process officials such as the special envoys to the Middle East, the secretaries of State and others in order to assess their perceptions, and most importantly, show how they were reflected in the Administration’s attitude that is defined by the interaction between various domestic and foreign structures.

2. **Comparative Historical Analysis (CHA):** One of the primary goals of the study is to build a historical narrative of the Obama Administration's legacy on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It will deploy CHA to build its narrative.

As explained by Neuman (2006) the CHA, as an interpretive tool, "tries to see through the eyes of those being studied, reconstructs the lives of the people studied, and examines particular individuals or groups." (p. 423). Therefore, it mainly uses the materials that can express the subjects of the study; that are the pieces of evidence left by them. By using the CHA, the researcher can collect available evidence of the subject matter, interpret them through reading their spatial-temporary context, and then reconstruct the past as a process of development.

Historical evidences according to the CHA are primary and secondary sources; the primary sources refer to the data about the events and the topic of study used during the past period such as documents, letters, statements and speeches. The secondary sources refer to the writings of specialist historians who have invested years studying primary sources.

In our case, policy makers of the American foreign policy in general and toward the Palestinian Israeli conflict in particular are the main individuals and groups on whom the CHA will be applied. Fortunately, there are plenty of primary sources produced by these actors during the Obama presidency such as the official speeches, TV and journalist interviews, statements, the UN resolutions and press releases, minutes of meetings, etc. However, it could be late for other primary sources to be written or released such the policy maker's memoirs. As for the secondary sources, examples are specialists, commentators, analysts, and journalists.

Following the steps of the CHA, the study uses the chosen conceptual framework of the American foreign policy toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a departure point, evaluate the available primary and secondary sources, organize data in a thematic order and synthesize the data reaching an explanatory narrative on the subject matter.

Hence, combining the models of the Foreign Policy Analysis and the CHA can assist the study to provide an explanatory and critically descriptive account on Obama's Administration policy toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In its first part, the study will start by tracking the development of Obama's ideas on the conflict before his inauguration and how this was reflected in the framework of initiatives proposed during the first phase of his presidency. In the second part, it will focus on the effects of the US-Israeli relations and how the restructure of the US position in the Middle East affected the Administration's attitude toward the conflict. To highlight the interaction between these perceptions and structures, the study will examine the UNSC 2334 resolution. Finally, the study will make use of the implications of Obama's peace failure to address the future of the peace process and the American role in deriving it.

d. Literature Review

So far, few studies have focused on the Obama Administration's policy toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Nevertheless, this does not negate the fact that there are numerous accounts on this subject matter from various perspectives and angles including scholarly papers, opinion pieces, book chapters and others. Most of the so-far published pieces do not cover the whole era; rather, they tackle specific phases or events of the peace process during Obama's Administration. While most of these accounts agree on the fact that its legacy concerning the conflict is poor and failed to make progress in pushing the peace process forward (Thrall, 2016; Thrall, 2017; Elgindy, 2016; Norman, 2016; Khalidi, 2013; Scham, 2014; Pressman, 2016; Shabaneh, 2015; Shlaim, 2017; Ruebner, 2013; Ruebner 2016), they do not offer an explanatory model in dealing with the reasons of failure. In tackling the ideational and structural factors that motivated and thwarted the Administration's efforts for peace, several accounts provide valuable antidotes to explore the mindsets of Obama and his peace operatives, and the structures in which they acted.

The first phase of the Obama presidency was a promising beginning for resolving the conflict. There were several reasons for the high expectation from the new president, including Obama's familiarity with the facts of the conflict. According to Thrall (2016) and Ruebner (2016), Obama is the most well informed American

president about the facts of the conflict, even before his inauguration. However, Rashid Khalidi's firsthand account as an ex-friend and a so-called detractor of Obama, suggests that this knowledge was restricted to the sphere of local politics and limited interactions with the Arab communities in Illinois. Khalidi, in fact, underestimates the effect of this knowledge; whereas he argues that Obama was exposed more to pro-Israeli influence as he entered the national electoral politics (Khalidi, 2013). An earlier firsthand account written by the American Palestinian activist Ali Abunimah (2007) proves this gradual change of Obama, turning toward the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) politics. He attributed it to the structure of the American electoral politics and the influence of the Jewish lobby.

Upon handling the cause, Obama was under the spell of ideational structures that were deeply embedded in the establishment. In fact, the Administration was willing to resolve the conflict that gained urgency, believing that the foreseen was in the best interest of the US. Aaron David Miller (2010) and Thrall (2017) give eloquent description of these structures and their perception of the American national interest. Miller argues that the peace process had developed as a creed within the ranks and file of the state department and the White House (pp. 50-59). On the other hand, Thrall suggests that the terrain was more complex. He divided the US officials involved in the peace process into three distinct groups according to their perceptions of the conflict and its settlements: the skeptics, the reproachers and the embracers. Believing in the necessity of peace and the US role, Obama was swinging between the last two groups that dominated his negotiating team across his two terms (pp. 196-204).

Obama and his officials' statement and speeches are instructive in explaining the change of their perception of the conflict and the peace process over the two terms. In fact, the sympathetic and relatively balanced tone of Obama speeches was a reason for the high expectations in the peace camp, where Obama was expected to act in an innovative way to resolve the stalemate. However as a president, Obama adopted a familiar approach to the conflict, largely drawn from the same playbook of his predecessor's Administrations (Khalidi, 2013; pressman, 2016). Therefore, Obama's policy was based on adopting the two-state solution, arranging high-level diplomatic efforts and appointing a special envoy for peace to the region. But these

conventional efforts had not achieved any breakthrough in brokering the peace between Palestinians and Israelis, and the first few months of Obama's Administration's efforts led to disappointment for the Palestinians and disquiet among Israelis (Fildman & Shikaki, 2009).

In their analysis of Obama's record in peacemaking in the Middle East, Thrall (2016) and Elgendy (2016) suggest that Obama, unlike his predecessors, is the only American president who does not have any considerable achievement in the peace process, and his only legacy could be its death. However, they do not explain this failure. On the contrary, Rashid Khalidi (2013) briefly argues that it was beyond Obama's reach to revive the peace process for reasons related to change in the makeup of the Congress after the midterm elections in 2009 for the republicans, the coming of Netanyahu's settler movement in Israel, and the restructure of the security agenda in the Middle East after the 2011 uprisings toward containing Iran's influence (p. 96). Furthermore, the bureaucratic politics was a factor in minimizing the possibilities of the foreseen settlement. Khalidi (2013) and Thrall (2017) saw Obama's decision to turn to the more pro-Israeli officials such as Dennis Ross as a setback.

Similarly, Shabaneh (2015) argues that the main reason for Obama's poor legacy in the peace process was his failure to use what he calls "smart power". He argues that Obama's policy was characterized by the reluctance to use diplomatic, cultural, legal, economic, and moral tools to end the Palestinian- Israeli conflict (Shabaneh, p. 6). In spite of the repertoire of the peace measures left by the former US presidents, Obama- especially in his second term- reluctantly used the least of them. As he was approaching the end of his presidency, he had not declared parameters to outline his stance concerning the conflict similar to what Clinton did in 2000 (Elgindy, 2016). Moreover, he did not declare the symbolic recognition of the state of Palestine, nor condemned the illegal Israeli occupation and settlements, by restoring to the UN Security Council (Thrall, 2016). Criticizing Obama's policy and urging his Administration to take last-minute steps, these two accounts do not explain the efforts carried out by John Kerry in 2014 and the initial attempts of Obama in resolving the conflict at the beginning of his presidency.

In fact, Obama's policy toward the conflict was carried out within a set of domestic and external structures. This study tends to focus on two structures, the chaotic security situation in the Middle East and its implications for the US in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, and the established Israeli-US relations. As for the former structure, several studies refer to it- even briefly- as a main reason for the failure of brokering peace (see Khalidi, 2013 p. 97; Scham, 2014). According to Ross and Jeffery (2013, p. 27), it was even harder for any US Administration to achieve peace advance while the region was overwhelmed with the rise of Islamist movements, civil wars, the looming collapse in Syria and the nuclear imbroglio of Iran, as these factors deepened disbelief in peace among the parties. Furthermore, this endangering environment changed the priority of the conflict and the urgency of making peace for the Administration over its tenure, especially in the second term (Jervis, 2017). But the most important implication of chaos, according to Scham (2014), is that in this unprecedented complexity, it was very hard for the United States to find a "good guy" to rely on in resolving the conflict "but currently every potential "good guy" is allied with some "bad guys".

However, the Obama Administration not only was a receiver of these deteriorating environment, but also contributed to it. Leslie Gelb's assessment of Obama's foreign policy (2012, pp. 18-28) suggests that it was full of constrictions and inconsistencies, and lacked strategic vision in dealing with topics including the Middle East and Palestine. Similarly, Karsh (2016) argues that Obama's delusion-based policy was more obvious in the Middle East. He maintains that this policy is to be blamed for promoting Iran's regional hegemony, driving Iraq and Libya to the verge of disintegration, expediting the surge of Islamist terrorism, exacerbating the Syrian civil war and making the prolonged Palestinian-Israeli conflict almost irreversible (p. 1).

As for the US-Israeli relations, it is a common element between several analyses to assume that it was a primary reason for peace failure, yet in different ways (see Khalidi, 2013; Thrall, 2016; Ruebner, 2016). In fact, this structure reflects the blurring lines between domestic and foreign policy, where the Jewish lobby is a major player in dictating the US's peace policy. For example, Scham (2014) contends that the domestic dynamics within the American political community play a major role in

preventing Obama's Administration from pursuing any pressure on the right-wing Israeli government in the peace process, in spite of the fact that the Jewish community has grown more divided on Israel than ever before.

Blackwill and Gordon (2016) provide a thorough analysis of the Israeli-US relations under the Obama Administration. They point out to the bad chemistry between Obama and Netanyahu as a main reason for the American-Israeli disagreements over many issues, including Iran, the democratic change in the Middle East and the Palestinian issue. They also think that there are structural changes within both the American and Israeli societies that have led to the US-Israel divergence, and accordingly the failure of the peace process. Whereas the American society is witnessing considerable leaning against the Israeli policies especially among the youth, the Israeli society is growing more conservative and hawkish (p 15-21).

However, these structural changes did not reach the level of influence of the Israeli lobby on the Administration's policy. This was clear in the huge military aid that Obama secured for Tel Aviv (Shlaim, 2017; Blackwill and Gordon, 2016) According to Shlaim; Obama was the most supportive US president to Israel, in spite of the bad blood between him and Netanyahu. Furthermore, several accounts refer, yet briefly, to the way that Netanyahu used the increasingly deteriorating security situation in the Middle East and the rise of the Iranian influence to put pressures on the Administration through the AIPAC in order to take harsher measures against Iran to prevent the Administration from pushing Israel toward any negotiations with the Palestinians (Khalidi, 2013; Thrall, 2016).

Therefore, while some of the literature point to the Administration's mistakes in brokering peace, it was clear that it acted in very complex and unhelpful structures of domestic politics and regional security situation where the US, under Obama, started to reposition its role as a hegemon power and the only broker of peace. Most of the existing accounts do not explain the relationship between the changes in these structures and the change of its perception of the conflict and the American national interest in solving it. This research aims at clarifying this relation over the two terms of the Administration.

IV. The Ideational Factors

a. The Development of Obama's Perception of the Conflict

During the US 2008, and after the victory of Barack Obama, many conflicting expectations surrounded his foreseen attitude towards the Middle East, especially in regards to the Palestinian question. Many Arabs and Arab Americans expected from Obama a just and evenhanded resolution to the century long conflict. They hoped for an agreement, which could achieve peace and security for both the Palestinians and the Israelis. It is difficult to fathom the role of Obama's rhetoric regarding Palestine and the conflict in raising the bar of expectations of several constituencies within and outside the United States. Obama did not stick to a single well-defined perception and position toward the conflict. As a politician in a highly dynamic political ecosystem, his ideas evolved even before assuming his White House office.

It is safe to say that Obama's initial take on the conflict was sympathetic to the plight of the Palestinian people as a democratic left who descends from a long tradition of civil rights activism. According to Thrall (2017, 211) Obama could draw parallels with Britain colonization of Kenya, where his Muslim father came, and the African American struggle for civil rights that dominated a great deal of his political stance especially regarding the domestic affairs until his last days in presidency. Gregory Orfalea (2008, 730) suggests that Obama's activism and his legal educational background, affected his advocacy for the rights of the Arab Americans, especially after the Patriot Act. For Orfalea, this advocacy that extended to the Palestine question to some degree was natural, given the ties between the Black American and Arabs and effects of long-seated discrimination against the two disenfranchised groups.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Obama built considerably strong ties with number of the Palestinian American Activists and the Arab American communities. For example he attended lectures by renowned figures like Edward Said, one of the eloquent harsh critics of Oslo peace accords and the Peace Process (Thrall 2017, 210). In 2003, He described the opinions of professor Rashid Khalidi,

the celebrated Palestinian American historian, saying: “consistent reminders to me of my own biases and my own blind spots” (Orfalea, 731). Reportedly, Obama also accepted fundraising and services grant from Khalidi and his wife during his electoral campaigning for the Senate’s elections in 2000. Khalidi was well known as moderate Palestinian intellectual who denounced violence and advocated the two state’s solution.

Against this background, Obama appeared to be more supportive to the Palestinian cause, and maybe one of the few deeply informed about it. During this time, Obama harshly rebuked the American Policy in the Middle East and called for a more even-handed approach toward Israel (Thrall 2017, 210) Nevertheless, his stance become more nuanced of the Israeli and American Jewish sensitivities, as he moved from Illinois politics to the national scene as early as 2002 (Abunimah, 2007). For example, he was reported in Forward magazine, a neo conservative pro- Israeli publication, to have courted the pro-Israeli constituency. Moreover, in 2004, he cosponsored an amendment that allowed the Illinois government to lend the state of Israel. (Abunimah 2007)

Running again for the democratic nomination for the US Senate seat, which he triumphed, Obama refrained from any anti-Israeli comments, deliberately ignoring the Palestinian cause (Orfalea 2008). According to the Palestinian American activist Ali Abunimah, Obama explained this by saying: “I haven't said more about Palestine right now, [because] we are in a tough primary race. I'm hoping when things calm down I can be more up front.” (Abunimah 2007) By stating this opinion, it was clear that Obama decided to distance himself from the activist legacy to embrace a more realistic and calculated position, which targets the electoral votes of the American Jews and the pro-Israeli constituency.

This position resembled those views of the establishment regarding the conflict. For example, during his First visit to the West Bank and Israel as a US Senator in January 2006, he was asked by a Palestinian Student about his opinion of the Israeli “Berlin Wall” (i.e. the wall separating Israeli and the West Bank), to which Obama responded by asserting that the US is supporting the two state states of Israel and Palestine and the question that matter was how to get there (Orfalea, 717).

Furthermore, during the Second Lebanon War (July –August 2006) between the IDF and Hizbullah, Obama stance was not far different from that of the Bush Administration. He accepted the Israeli narrative of the conflict and saw its aggression as an exercise of its right of self-defense (Abunimah 2007). According to the American critic Noam Chomsky, Obama as a senator co-sponsored a Senate resolution calling the United States do nothing to impede IDF military actions until they had achieved their objectives and censuring Iran and Syria because they were supporting resistance to Israel” (Engelhard 2013). On the Palestinian front, he opposed the national government unity between Fatah and Hamas, calling for more isolation of the latter Islamist group until it meets the conditions of the Quartet (Abunimah 2007).

Running for the presidency in 2007, Obama had become much closer to the Bush Administration’s position of the conflict. Addressing the American Israeli Public Relations Committee (AIPAC) in June 2008, Obama asserted he would never compromise when it came to Israel’s security, and Israel would not be forced to the negotiating table to discuss any agreement, which could compromise its identity as a Jewish state with recognized and defensible borders. Moreover, he emphasized that Hamas, as a terrorist group, would be denied of participation in any dialogue, until it renounces terrorism and recognizes Israel’s right to exist, reiterating the American commitment to defend Israel security and curb any threat to it from any hostile parties in the region from Gaza to Tehran (Obama speech, June 2008). Through claiming such position, Obama became much closer to the official standing of the establishment towards Israel. The power of the Jewish Lobby can easily reflect this change, as their support was imperative for winning the votes of large American constituencies (Abunimah 2007; Orfalea 2008).

However, on some occasions, Obama expressed some activist’s sympathy with the plight of the Palestinians, by taking what can be called sympathetic realist position. This was clear in the First Gaza war December 2008-January 2009, also known as the Operation Cast Lead, which ended just few days before his inauguration. During the conflict, Obama refrained from criticizing the Israeli aggression, which claimed the lives of 1,400 Palestinians (Black 2009). His comments highlighted “substantial suffering and humanitarian needs in Gaza. Our

hearts go out to Palestinian civilians who are in need of immediate food, clean water, and basic medical care, and who've faced suffocating poverty for far too long." He emphasized the need to lift the blockade imposed by Israel on the Gaza strip stating, "As part of a lasting cease-fire, Gaza's border crossings should be open to allow the flow of aid and commerce." (Cited in Ruebner 2016).

Consequently, it appears that Obama did not construct a cohesive vision of the conflict before his election to presidency. Rather, his vision evolved gradually from activism to realpolitik as he was approaching the establishment until he assumed its top position in January 2009. This claim does not negate the effects of his activist legacy, but it suggests that it was knitted into a more realistic and domestically defined approach towards the conflict. This legacy and what it subsumed as sympathy with Palestinians did not dominate his policies especially in his first term. One might argue that two different ideas affected his Israel/Palestine policy, the need for reconciliation with the Muslim world and the "Peace Process" as a deep-seated norm with the American establishment.

- 1) The reconciliation with the Muslim World: Obama was fully aware of the deteriorating legacy that Bush Administration inflicted on the relationship between the US and the Muslim World. Since the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, these relations were characterized by the invasion and the destruction of the US and its allies to two Muslim countries, Afghanistan and Iraq, threatening to invade others, and supporting the right-wing successive government of Israel against the Palestinians and other Arab nations, particularly in their aggressions against Lebanon and Gaza under the name of fighting Islamic terrorism and forced democratization, in addition to inciting Islamophobia in the US and Europe (See Wolffe 2016; Fleischhauer 2011; Katz 2010).

Distancing himself from this problematic legacy, which endangered the US national interests and its relations with the Middle Eastern, allies, Obama, in his inauguration speech promised, "a new beginning" with the Muslim World. As he put it, "To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward based on mutual interest and mutual respect (Obama 2009). According to some commentators, this novel approach

reflected Obama's worldview where he perceived the Muslim world as a large coherent community, which can be addressed and accommodated. He identified himself as a linking bridge between the West and the Muslim world to which his father belonged and lived for several years (Oren 2015). These beliefs made Obama aware of the fact that the grievances caused primarily by the American policy particularly in the Middle East are related to each other. For example, Orfalea (2008, 727-728) argued that it was the Iraq war that foretold Obama principled stance on Palestine/ Israel. Obama opposed this war since it started on the basis of its illegality and its irrelevance to fight terrorism (Ibid, 728). According to Orfalea, Obama had suspicious feelings towards the unanimous support behind this war among the American Zionist lobby¹, AIPAC in particular, and the neo-conservative politicians and the Israeli government (Ibid, 728). For Obama, this catastrophic war was indicative of the incompetency of the U.S Middle Eastern Diplomacy under the Bush Administration. He, instead proposed a direct, real and sustained diplomacy without preconditions. Orfalea thought that new approach might have led to a greater initiative in the Holy Land, through including the outside actors that have leverage on the final settlements in Palestine such as Hizbullah, Iran and Syria (Ibid, 729).

The connection, which Orfalea tried to build in his account, became more evident in Obama's speech to the Muslim world in June 2009. This speech was meant to be part of Obama's new approach to the Muslim World as he spoke to the Arabs and Muslims of the world directly (Hamid 2017). In the speech, Palestine appeared as the second source of tension between the US and the Muslim communities after the Iraq war, which he portrayed as an illegal war of choice (Obama 2009). While asserting that the bond between the US and Israel was unbreakable, he emphasized, "it is also undeniable that the Palestinian people – Muslims and Christians – have suffered in pursuit of a homeland. For more than sixty years they have endured the pain of dislocation" (Ibid), "America," he declared, will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own." And the only way to break the stalemate for the two peoples is through two states, where Israelis

¹ For more details on the role of the Jewish lobby in the Iraq war, see Stephen Walt & John Mearsheimer (2007). The Israel Lobby and the U.S. Foreign Policy. USA: Farrar, Starus and Giroux.

and Palestinians each live in peace and security [...] That is in Israel's interest, Palestine's interest, America's interest, and the world's interest.” (Ibid)

Alluding to his approach to the resolution, Obama highlighted his multilateral diplomacy in which all the parties including the Arab countries had a role to perform beyond drafting peace initiatives. According to several commentators, Obama’s remarks were and [remained] the most sympathetic by an U.S. president on Israel’s dispossession of Palestinians (Ruebner 2016). It was striking in its clarity and criticisms of the Israeli settlement policy in the West Bank as the primary obstacle to peace (Oren 2015). Nevertheless, it was not only about Palestine, it was to recast the whole American foreign policy with a major part of the world, Muslim countries. As Obama chose to pursue his predecessor policy in Afghanistan, where he saw it as a war of choice, and to pull the American troops from Iraq, the process that was completed in 2011. The Palestinian cause was the only source of tension that gained urgency and he had to start quickly to deal with it.

- 2) Peace Process and the American National Interest: As the Cairo speech alluded to, achieving peace in Palestine/ Israel was a national interest of the US and all the involved. In fact, this belief was well established within the American Foreign policy institutions since the first Washington brokered peace agreement between Israel and Arab parties in the 1970s. The American veteran diplomat Aaron David Miller (2010, 50-59) depicts this normative belief to what he named as an official creed among the American diplomacy. Miller argued that the peace process had become a dogmatic creed with immutable principles dominating both the State Department and the White House. This creed, Miller maintains, is based on based on three teachings; first, pursuit of comprehensive peace was a core, if not the core, the American interest in the region, and achieving it secured the *only* way to maintain the American interests; second, peace can be *only* achieved through a serious negotiating process based on trading land for peace; and third, *only* the U.S. could help the Arabs and the Israelis to bring about this peace (ibid, 51).

Miller argues that these three tents that drove all the U.S. presidents since the 1970s, with considerable exception of George W. Bush and Ronald Regan who at

some points succumbed to them and proposed some peace initiatives, had turned out to be durable and bipartisan. Furthermore, they were fully embraced by whom he called the high priests of national security including the State departments veterans, like himself, intelligence analysts and most of the U.S. foreign policy senior officials and experts (Ibid, 51-52). Obama, according to Miller, was a zealous believer in this foreign policy creed; he had converted very early even before getting into the White House (Ibid, 52).

Portraying a more nuanced picture of the belief in the peace process in relation to the U.S. interests, Thrall (2017, 196-206) suggested that the American officials involved in the Peace Process could be divided into three groups:

- i. **Skeptics:** the smallest group, which comprises conservatives and neoconservatives such as Elliot Abrams, John Bolton and Douglas Feith, who believe that Arabs will not agree to peace on terms acceptable to the Israeli center-right majority. Opposing the peace process from the start, they have had limited influence on the US-brokered negotiations. Even after the Bush Administration endorsed the establishment of the Palestinian state, they still opposed it. More importantly, they believe that most of the significant agreements between Israel and the Arabs- from the Oslo accords to the peace agreement with Jordan- were initiated without the US. Therefore, the US brokered negotiations are not only waste of time for Washington; they are also destabilizing and dangerous. This group tends to focus on the bottom-to-top changes, such as promoting the project of institution's building in the PA territories. Moreover, they promoted the notion of isolating Hamas and the other Islamist parties on the basis of fighting terrorism, as they fiercely backed Israel in its aggression against the Gaza strip in 2008/2009, and during the Lebanon war in 2006 (pp. 196-198).
- ii. **Reproachers:** this influential group comprises of self-described realists and veterans of the peace process who are critical to themselves and other officials for having acted as "Israel's lawyers" in the words of Aaron David Miller. It includes names like George Mitchell, the officials in the US consulate in Jerusalem the J Street, American for Peace Now and other critical groups. This group believes in the possibility of achieving peace and ending conflict

through negotiations where they seek to play the role of “balanced” mediators. They tend also to think that the conflict can be resolved if the US were to put sufficient pressure on Israel within the limits of the US domestic politics (often tend to be *verbal* pressures). Above all, this group believes in the inevitability of the American role as the main mediator and broker of peace. Unlike the skeptics, they emphasize the urgency of Israel’s need to reach an agreement with the Palestinians (pp. 198-202).

- iii. Embracers: this wide and most influential group combines the skeptics’ unconditional support of Israel and the reproachers’ unwavering faith in the peace process. Like the former, they believe that the US focus on the settlements is mistaken. While they agree with the reproachers on the necessity of the US involvement in the peace process, they firmly believe, as do the skeptics, that peace can be only achieved by embracing Israel tightly, reassuring it and alleviating its fears. For them, Israel is the stronger party that has more to give and more to lose; so, it needs more confidence in the US to take generous step (pp. 202-204). In fact, the historical seeds of this group can be found in the logic by which Henry Kissinger invented the Peace Process, where he sought to secure strategic advantages for Israel during the protracted and incremental process of negotiations with its neighbors, Egypt and Syria during the 1973 war and after it. This may explain more the relative strength of this group, as it has always represented the procedural and incrementalist logic of the peace process (see Khalil 2014).

Given his firm belief in peace, and his sympathetic realism, and partly his activist legacy, Obama was not a skeptic. According to Thrall (p. 203), when Obama entered the White House, he believed that Bush Administration’s Skeptics were too intimate to Israel, and he thought that this intimacy did not yield any practical results for the peace process. But certainly, he swayed between the other two groups; yet never fully belonged to either. In the following section, I argue that Obama at first embraced the critical approach of the reproachers; but when his efforts to re-launch the negotiations failed, he moved toward the embracers and became more unwilling to engage more with the conflict increasingly complicating facts on the grounds. This shift highlighted in his peace staff and envoys, reflected a change in the definition of the American national interests in relation to the conflict.

b. The Abortive Resumption Of The Negotiations

As a president, Obama addressed the conflict early on (Miller, 2010; Thrall, 2016; Khalidi, 2012). It was Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, one of the first foreign leaders Obama called in his first day in the White House. This made some Palestinian officials to think that “[he] is so serious about the Palestinian problem” (Thrall, 2016). Convinced by the possibility of enforcing the two state solutions, on his second day, Obama appointed Senator George Mitchell as the US The US Middle East peace envoy in January 2009 (CNN, 2009). The choice of Mitchell was very promising given Mitchell’s instrumental role in the Good Friday Agreement that achieved peace in Northern Ireland, and his authorship of the fact-finding report in April 2001, The Mitchell Report, which recommended a freeze on the Israeli settlement construction in 2001 (Ruebner, 2016; Khalidi, 2013, p. 97). In addition to Mitchell, Obama filled his Administration with “peace believer” figures such as the chief of staff Rahm Emanuel and the secretary of state Hilary Clinton and his national security advisor James L. Jones, a former Middle East envoy, who had announced that: “If there was one problem that I would recommend the president [to solve], this would be it” (Miller, 2010, 52).

Moreover, during a meeting with Mahmoud Abbas the PA President in May 2009, Obama promised that “the establishment of a Palestinian state is a must for me personally,” according to meeting minutes leaked to Al Jazeera. This allegedly changed atmosphere, which led the PA’s lead negotiator to claim, “In an expeditious manner, we will get to the two-state solution,” he maintained, “The Washington I went to last week isn’t the Washington I knew before.” (Ruebner, 2016) Most importantly, after the same meeting, the Administration called for a complete freeze in the Israeli settlement building in the West Bank and Jerusalem. Nevertheless, it was clear that Obama's good offices were to hit the inconvenient changes of politics in the region. In April 2009, a new right-wing government was elected in Israel and headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, whose role determined a good deal of Obama's policy toward the conflict.

For some observers (Feldman and Shikaki, 2009; Scham, 2014) it was not a well spotted bet by Obama’s Administration to start its intervention with demand on

freezing the settlement's building as a precondition for re-launching the negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis. On one hand, it was difficult for the newly elected Israeli government to accept this condition as it was heavily based on the settlers' parties (Scham, 2014). On the other hand, by setting the freeze call as a precondition, Obama's Administration turned it from a confidence-building measure required for launching the negotiations' process into an integral part of the process without putting it into a larger strategy of the conflict resolution (Feldman and Shikaki, 2009). According to Menenberg, (2011, p. 29) Obama's preconditions backlashed as they created more gaps between the two concerned parties.

Whatever the first mistakes of the Obama Administration, it was clear that it could not remain adherent to the freeze demand. Thereby, it surrendered in September 2009 while pressuring the Palestinians to accept the conditions for resuming the process of negotiations: "Firstly, during the talks Israel could continue building new settlements in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Secondly, while Israel violated international law the Palestinians had to refrain from peacefully employing it, including by exercising their lawful right to join multilateral institutions, which, unlike Israel's settlement activity, the US said it would consider an act of "bad faith" (Thrall, 2014).

The swinging pressures did not lead to advancement in the process as the divisions were being hardened on both sides and the initial period turned into a waste of time of mutual disappointments. While a slow progress was being made, Netanyahu further complicated the process. In order to preempt the Palestinians call for the right to return, he demanded on their acceptance to the Jewishness of Israel as a precondition for negotiations, downplaying his earlier scheme of the economic peace in the West Bank.

Finally, this stalemate led to Mitchell's resignation as Obama's special envoy in May 2018. While it was Mitchell's personal request, it was evident that the Netanyahu attitude towards the attempt to revive the peace process caused his resignation. According to Avi Shlaim (2016), unlike Northern Ireland, where both parties remained committed to the success of the peace process, Netanyahu regarded peace as an American interest, not an Israeli one. Therefore, he did his best to turn

this American-led peace process into a charade, which Mitchell clearly did not want to be a part of. Moreover, the regional instability following the popular uprisings, the explosion of other conflicts, civil wars and armed struggles all over the Arab world exposed the vulnerability of the American Middle Eastern policy and complicated the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Netanyahu was not the only one who threw obstacles in Mitchell's way. According to Khalidi (2013, pp. 107-110) some obstacles came from within the Administration and Washington politics, which undermined Mitchel's mission for peace. Firstly, the absence of the congressional endorsement of his approach regarding Hamas and the settlement freeze. The Capitol Hill did not embrace the settlement freeze, and Mitchel could not gain the support of his colleagues for softer conditions to engage Hamas into the negotiations. He was told that his proposal is a nonstarter. Moreover, Mitchel was a victim of a prolonged bureaucratic mugging by another "peace process" pro-Israel operative. This was no one other than Dennis Ross. Appointed in the National Security Council (NSC) by Obama as a reward for his efforts in securing the Jewish votes of the swing states, Ross advocated "pre-emptive acceptance of to what he described as the [Netanyahu] coalition's red lines." i.e. the unity of his settler government's coalition, in other words the continuation of settlement expansion.

In Thrall's terms, the pressure imposed by Ross, and accepted by Obama, pushed the Administration from the position of the reproachers to that of the embracers. This was obvious when Ross, who triumphed over Mitchel, got complete dealings with the Israeli government, and reportedly made, in fall 2010, it an extraordinary offer that included twenty F-35 stealth fighters, a US veto of a planned UNSC resolution on Palestinian statehood, in exchange for three months settlement freeze that would not apply to the entire Jerusalem. According to the former US ambassador and peace process veteran Daniel Kurtzer that was unprecedented US move since "previously US opposition to settlements resulted in penalties, not rewards." (Kurtzer, 2010) Endorsed by Obama, the offer was rejected by Netanyahu, whereas the number of tenders issued for new housing in East Jerusalem quadrupled (Thrall, 2017, p. 201).

c. Obama Embraces the Israeli Narrative

Upon a visit paid by the US Vice President Joe Biden to Israel in May 2010, the Israeli government announced a major settlement expansion in East Jerusalem. For Ruebner (2016, p. 51), this decision was a deliberate hit from Netanyahu to Obama. And for Miller (2010, p. 53), it signified that Obama was helpless and lacked a robust strategy on pushing Israel to peace. In fact, it was Netanyahu's triumph, which asserted a loss of hope for peace among the Administration, where the "peace believers" especially the reproachers started succumbing to the deeply rooted structures of the American politics regarding the conflict. This reflected in more center leaning rhetoric, and perception. Gradually, Obama dropped the urgency of freezing the settlement and the necessity of the Palestinian statehood in favor of the emphasis of the existential threats Israel faced in the Middle East (Khalidi 2013, 90).

In a speech delivered before the UN General Assembly in September 2011, Obama asserted, "Israel is surrounded by neighbors that have waged repeated wars against it." In reference to its geopolitical vulnerability and the hostile neighbors, he stated "leaders of much larger nations threaten to wipe it off of the map." Moreover, Obama associated this situation to the historic persecution to the Jewish people that culminated in the Holocaust (see Obama speech 2011). This theme was repeated in a striking manner during his speech to AIPAC in March 2012, where he used the evocative words and emotional words "Israel's destruction" twice in one paragraph. According to Khalidi (2013, p. 91), this signified a complete acceptance of the Zionist narrative of the conflict in the region. Nevertheless, it was not an unexpected transformation, since we can trace the seeds of this perception in Obama's previous speeches. It became clear that the peace process was no longer balanced, but USA was adamant to achieve it according to its vision.

A central notion of this slightly new discourse was countering what had been called 'delegitimization of Israel.' This term refers to, according to several Israel advocacy groups, ["negating] the right of the Jewish people to live in a sovereign democratic and Jewish state in the historical homeland of the Jewish people, modern day Israel" (The Jewish Federations, no date). In fact, it extends to cover any criticism directed against the state of Israel on the basis of international law, such as its occupation of the West Banks and other Arab territories since 1967, its besiege

against Gaza strip and turning it into the biggest prison in the world and the violations of the human rights of millions of Palestinians living under occupation. According to Khalidi (2013, p.97), this term stems from the assumption that these actions, and others, are “legitimate” in the international law.

In his interview with the *Atlantic*’ Jeffery Goldberg in March 2012, Obama highlighted his military and diplomatic support to Israel on many levels such as “ensuring that Israel maintains its qualitative military edge, fighting back against delegitimization of Israel, whether at the [UN] Human Rights Council, or in front of the UN General Assembly, or during the Goldstone Report, or after the flare-up involving the flotilla [*Mavi Marmara* incident in May 2010]” (Goldberg, 2012).

Ironically, these efforts extended to include the Obama Administration’s rejection of any attempt to promote the Palestinian rights in the international forums, even symbolically. For the Administration, this was a catastrophic setback of the already halted peace talk, and an attempt to “delegitimize Israel,” so it intervened to prevent it (Ruebner, 2016, p. 57). The glaring example of this policy was when the Administration mobilized its full resources to quash the PA’s bid for statehood recognition and full membership in the UN. Obama castigated openly the Palestinians for their bid saying, in a speech delivered to the UN General Assembly, that they were using the wrong forums, as UN resolutions and statements could not achieve peace, which could only be reached through negotiations (Cooper, 2011). Later, in an AIPAC conference, he asserted, “No vote at the United Nations will ever create an independent Palestinian state.”

The Administration spared no effort during a full year to assure that Palestine would not become a full member of the UN. According to Wendy Sherman, undersecretary of state for political affairs, the Administration was doing a very broad and very vigorous demarche,” against the Palestinian membership in the UN, “of virtually every capital in the world [and] that this is high on the agenda for every meeting the secretary has with every world leader” (Rogin, 2011). However, the PA applied for statehood status. Its request languished in the UN Security Council’s committee because of the US rejection. As a consolation, the UN General Assembly granted Palestine the status of permanent non-Observer in November 2012. The

resolution passed by 138 in favor, 9 against and 41 abstentions. The U.S. was among the opposing votes, besides Israel (UN GA/11317).

Even these capitulations were not sufficient for the Jewish lobby and the hawkish republicans who fiercely attacked Obama's approach regarding Israel/Palestine. When the 2012 elections approached, the republican candidate Mitt Romney said that Obama "threw Israel under the bus," and asked about the policy he would conduct on the conflict, he replied "You could just look at the things the president (Barack Obama) has done and do the opposite" (Cited in Ruebner, 2016 p. 53). In fact, doing the opposite was stripping Israel from the unprecedented support that it had since decades; and undoing several favors the Obama Administration had done to Tel Aviv.

V. The Structural Factors

This chapter sheds lights on the objective context in which the Administration was operating which presented constraints on its movement for peace. This context consisted in several elements; I refer to them as structures reflecting relations, settings and positions. For the matter at hand, I focus on two structures, the post-2011 chaotic security situation in the Middle East, the aftermath of the Arab uprisings; and the US-Israeli relations. While the former represents foreign factor that affects the US position in the region, the latter reflects, to a larger extent, the interplay of the between domestic and foreign contexts. Furthermore, the two factors were not separated they converged at some points and led to downgrading peace in Palestine on the American agenda for the Middle East since 2011 until the end of the Obama Administration.

c. Chaotic Security Situation in the Middle East

When Obama came into office in 2009, he inherited a deteriorating situation in the Middle East, and was willing to rebalance the U.S. commitments to the region (Lynch, 2015). His strategy, that was compatible with his vision as a non-interventionist and a peacemaker with the Muslim World, aimed at completing the withdrawal from Iraq and achieving peace in Palestine (Jervis, 2017). Yet, the unprecedented changes in the aftermath of the ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings brought up confusion to this strategy, as the region grew into a complicated terrain of conflicts, and local and regional strife. The Middle East has become a more dangerous security environment where the costs of preserving security and keeping stability have become higher than the Obama Administration was not willing to pay. Therefore Obama turned his rebalance strategy into gradual resizing or “rightsizing” the American commitment to the region (Lynch, 2015). This new strategy did not mean disengagement with the region but reprioritizing its objectives and concerns.

It is hard to determine whether the Obama Administration created this security structure, or it was only affected by it. For Lynch (2015) it was a systemic response to a new set of security challenges and flaws in the original vision that led Obama’s Middle Eastern policy. Karsh (2017), on the other hand, argues it was Obama’s passivity and inaction that led to more destabilizing the region, with the rise of violent

Islamist extremism, Iran expanded influence and collapse of peace talks in Israel/Palestine. Nevertheless, this complicated situation limited the options for brokering peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis from several aspects:

- **Losing urgency:** in the light of turmoil in Syria, the collapse of the state in Libya, the civil war in Yemen, the rise of terrorist movements in Syria and Iraq and other calamities across the region, the Palestinian plight was overshadowed from the view of many parties, not only the U.S., but even among the Arab states and peoples. On one hand, the conflict proved to be less deadly than other conflict zones in the region. While these conflicts claimed the lives of thousands and pushed millions to displacement and exile, the conflict in Palestine/ Israel claimed the lives of few persons, except for the armed confrontations between the Israel and Hamas in 2012-2013 and 2014. On the other hand, unlike other conflicts, Palestine hardly had anything to do with other far-reaching repercussions such as terrorism, state collapse and regional proxy wars between Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Israel. Therefore, for Obama, in accordance with the rightsizing strategy, Palestine was not the right place to start and to invest diplomatic resources, although it was a constant item on his agenda, yet downgraded after other urgent issues.
- **Redefining national interests in the region:** essential to rightsizing the American commitment to the region was to reduce the U.S. national interest in the region into security concerns, excluding conflict resolution or peace brokering in Palestine or anywhere else in the region. According to this vision, Iran nuclear program and combatting terrorist networks of the Islamic State (ISIS) and AlQaeda became priorities in which he would spend more energy and resources. For the former, Obama showed great interest in containing Iran's nuclear ambitions through multilateral framework, for sharing benefits and risks with other stakeholders. According to Lynch (2015), the Iran deal or the JCPOA, reached in 2015 between Iran and the 5+1 group, was an example of success where priorities were outlined, resources were allocated and outcome was achieved. More strikingly, Obama was willing to defy the pressures pursued by the Netanyahu government, the hawkish lobby and

his Arab allies who wanted harsh actions against Iran. As for terrorism in the Middle East, the Obama Administration in 2014 led an international coalition of regional and international powers to fight ISIS in Syria and Iraq. This coalition was effective in liberating the northern Iraq from the terrorist group by the end of 2017. This willingness to allocate resource for achieving specific goals was not missing in dealing with the peace process in Palestine/ Israel, as the conflict did not fit Administration of national interest's modified rubric after the 2011 unrests.

- Losing natural allies: as Scham (2014) puts it, against the unprecedented complexity, it was very hard for the United States to find a "good guy" to rely on in resolving the conflict "but currently every potential "good guy" is allied with some "bad guys." Furthermore, one might add that the regime change in Egypt that ousted Mubarak in 2011 made the US peace more difficult. Mubarak, in spite of his regime undemocratic vices, was an experienced broker from the beginning of the Peace process in Madrid in 1991. The successive regimes following the Egyptian uprisings had complicated relations with the US and were not interested in exerting so much effort in any regional crises including Palestine. The other former "good guys" in the region especially Turkey and Saudi Arabia found in the US abandonment of the hegemonic behavior under Obama a historic chance to manipulate the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Yemen and instability in Egypt. peace in Palestine has not been a project to pay off for them.
- Losing belief in peace: According to Ross and Jeffery (2013, p. 27), the unrests in the region make both Israelis and Palestinians reluctant to take risks for peace. They deepened the crux of the stalemate, which is the mistrust between the two parties. Theoretically, this could be true, given the magnitude of uncertainty and hostility, induced by the conflictual environment. Yet, this analysis neglects that role of the domestic politics of each party in minimizing the possibilities of peace. In fact, the makeup of the Netanyahu movement, the settler movements behind it, and the Palestinian chronic divide between Hamas and Fatah have been crucial in throwing more hurdles in the way for peace.

Facing all these major changes, Obama, who had turned into a realist, at least when it come to the Middle East politics, lost a great deal of his personal and political interest in brokering the peace in Palestine/ Israel. As he was at deep odds with his Administration on the strategic options for managing the conflict in Syria, Libya and other places, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lost its relevance to his Middle Eastern vision and agenda.

d. The U.S.- Israeli Relationship

In dealing with the American Israeli relationships, Obama was between a rock and a hard place. Obama came to office against the background of extraordinary pro-Israeli policies during the Bush Administration (Khalidi, 2013, p. 104). As we have seen, Obama succumbed to this fact, even before being a president, and he emphasized more than once on the solidness of the bonds between the Washington and Tel Aviv. This change was more obvious in the diplomatic support Israel gained at the expense of the Palestinian and the peace process. Israel was not only diplomatically satisfied with the Obama Administration; it was pleased with the unprecedented military support it gained from Obama. As Avi Shlaim (2017) put it, Obama fully lived up to America's formal commitment to preserve Israel's "qualitative military edge" by supplying his ally with ever more sophisticated weapons systems. His aid was a staggering military package of \$38bn for the next 10 years. This represents an increase from \$3.1 to \$3.8bn per annum. It was also the largest military aid package from one country to another in the annals of human history.

The Irony is that this unwavering support to Israel was going against a background of nonworking chemistry between Obama and the Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. It was a fact that any of them did not try to hide it. For example, in the 2012 presidential elections, it was clear that Obama was not Netanyahu's best White House resident, so he supported the Republican candidate Mitt Romney and did his best to mobilize the Jewish lobby to have Obama out (Pfeffer, 2012). Obama, on his side, showed how bad was his relation with Netanyahu. For example, on the sidelines of a G-20 meeting in Paris in 2011, the former French president Nicolas Sarkozy reportedly described Netanyahu as a liar, and Obama replied by saying: "You're sick of him -- but I have to deal with him every

day" (Smith, 2011). A year later, in his interview with the Atlantic, Obama alluded to the divergence in perception between himself and Netanyahu. "I think it is absolutely true," Obama said "that the prime minister and I come out of different political traditions. This is one of the few times in the history of U.S.-Israeli relations where you have a government from the right in Israel at the same time you have a center-left government in the United States" (Goldberg, 2012). Furthermore, it was Obama's coolness, even when he was supporting Israel rhetorically, that brought him under the fire criticism from Netanyahu and his American allies within the lobby and the hawkish republicans (Khalidi, 2013, p. 98).

Yet, it was the deep-rooted structure of the relations between the two allies, not the personalities that can explain this unprecedented support from Obama to Israel. The elements of this structure can be explained as follow:

- Strategic partnership: Israel is not only the beneficiary of its alliance with the United States, the latter also benefits substantially from this relationship (Blackwell and Gordon, 2016, 15). When it comes to the security concern, Israel is the closest ally of the U.S. in the world's most unstable region; it shares valuable intelligence with Washington on terrorism, proliferation and regional politics. Moreover, the U.S. draws very important military advantages from this alliance in fields like military technology, intelligence and cyber security. Economically, despite its small size and population, Israel is the largest regional investor in the U.S., and an important research and development partner for the American high-tech sector and a source of innovative ideas and experimenting the challenges of the 21st century such as renewable energy and water and food security (Ibid, 15).
- Colonial "metropole": the similarities between the origins of the American and Israeli societies as colonial enterprises have long been discussed. In spite of the huge changes in both societies they have not lost their significance. According to Khalidi (2013, 102), the United States had become over years in some respects a metropole for the Israeli settlement enterprise in the West Bank. This is obvious in terms of the generous and tax-deducted private American funding of settlements and the constant movement from the U.S. to Israel of religious nationalist

settlers, most of them aggressive and fanatical to live in these settlements and outposts. This situation created an organic relationship between large parts of the Israeli society and politics and their counterparts in the U.S. This organic relation between Israel and large swathes of the American society can also be explained by the effect of the evangelical white right, where this conservative sect see Israel through the prism of fundamentalist interpretation of the bible, as the Holy Land belong only to the modern Israelis, as it belonged before to the Israelites of the Old Testament (see Weber 1998). The influence of these groups was clear during the Bush Administration, and did wane during its successor, especially among the white middle class. Accordingly, addressing the U.S. Israeli relationships' concerns are to touch on domestic politics.

- The power of the Lobby: it is a backbone of this structure, to which Obama capitulated once moved to the national politics (see Abunimah, 2007; Khalidi, 2013). But it was not only about the electoral politics and its complexities in the U.S., the Israeli lobby is a part of the foreign policy institutions outside the official establishment. From his side, as a democrat, Obama was keen on keeping the Jewish community's support to the Democratic Party, and he made it to the White House again in 2012, avoiding any provocative talk on just and permanent peace or the illegitimacy of Israeli settlements. This is not saying that the lobby factor was the only determinant in Obama's change of heart regarding Palestine. It is a contributing factor in the dynamics of American domestic and foreign policies. Even though, this factor has undergone structural shifts in the last years and become more complicated. Recently, the Jewish community in the US has grown more divided over Israel (Sasch, 2014). The organized Jewish lobby has no longer become the only voice speaking for the American Jewry as other social movements challenging its monopoly notably the J Street and American for Peace Now (APN) that are condemning Israel hawkish policies. Although these alternative voice groups are still much smaller than AIPAC, their activism reflects increasing changes in the traditional lobby politics regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Balckwill and Gordon 2016, 19). Martin Indyk (Rothkoff, 2014) suggested that these changes ushered generational

changes in the American Society where the younger generation had grown less supportive of Israel that is moving under the Likud leadership towards more ultra-religious nationalism.

Even these changes did not alter the effect of this structure on the choices of the Obama Administration regarding the peace process. It was hard for the Administration to defy the pressures from within and from the Netanyahu government, as it was attending for other items on its Middle Eastern agenda that had been defined by the first factor. In fact, one might argue that between 2012 and 2015, the Obama traded the peace in Palestine with the nuclear deal with Iran. While it managed to gain the support of the large part of the establishment, particularly in the congress, it avoided further pressures from the Netanyahu government by dropping the push of peace in Palestine.

In fact, Obama's success to avoid the Lobby, and Netanyahu pressures, in the Iran deal, while failing to do so when it came to Palestine, can be explained by the very different approaches he chose from the beginning to handle each of them. In Iran, Obama chose to be internationalist, pursuing multilateral diplomacy where other international powers were involved in the negotiations. It was, therefore, easier for him to highlight the legitimacy of the agreement and to ease the pressure from within. On the contrary, dealing with peace in Palestine, Obama and his administration preferred to pursue the traditional monopoly on the cause, which is one of the pillars of the peace process creed, and did not try to invite other players to help, and showed no enthusiasm for non-American initiatives, consider the French peace initiative in the Middle East in June 2016. Consequently, the American diplomacy in Palestine remained under the spell of the domestic legitimacy not the legitimacy of the international community.

In the following chapter, the study shall tackle the last attempts made by the Administration regarding the conflict against the background of the changes of perceptions and the exigencies and changes of the structures.

VI. Obama's "too little, too late" legacy

a. Kerry's warmed over diplomacy

By the beginning of his second term, Obama seemingly did not lose his belief in the possibility for peace. Nevertheless, he evidently lost his enthusiasm for it. In fact, the Administration reshuffle renewed the hopes for peace in Palestine/Israel. The appointment of Sen. John Kerry as Secretary of State heralded a fresh start for the talk. To assist Kerry in his new mission, Obama appointed the veteran former ambassador to Tel Aviv Martin Indyk in July 2013. At the beginning, the confluence of both Kerry's sense of responsibility and Indyk's expertise suggested the possibility of reaching a reasonable compromise. For Thrall (2017, p. 203), this appointment indicated Obama's complete adoption of the embracers' total vision and methods of brokering peace that would not come through pursuing pressures on Israel, but through more seductive offers.

However, the efforts of the new peace team worked for a while. Longer and more intensive peace talks resumed in the summer of 2013 until April 2014. In fact, this round was the most intensive U.S.-mediated Israeli-Palestinian negotiations since the Clinton Administration (Ruebner, 2016, 55). The team, especially Kerry, showed a great belief in peace through protracted negotiation, so that Thrall (2017, 190-209) called their efforts a faith-based diplomacy, whereas the Economist (January 2014) described it as methodical midwifery. "Kerry," according to Shlaim (2016) "demonstrated the courage of his convictions, and he displayed astonishing energy in pursuit of a breakthrough. In his first year as secretary of state, he paid no less than eleven visits to the region."

It was not a lack of faith, therefore, that led to the failure of these sincere efforts. From one side, Kerry deeply believed that, unlike other insoluble conflicts in the Middle East, a resolution to this conflict is achievable. For him, decades of efforts failed in achieving peace, not because of the irresponsible positions of both parties, but mainly because they did not trust each other. His panacea to this chronic case was making promises to both parties, yet inconsistent and contradicting promises. He told the Israelis that the Palestinians would join the talks in exchange for the release of prisoners without insistence on the settlement freeze. He gave the Palestinians a letter affirming the final goal of the U.S. was to create a Palestinian state on the 1967

borders. While, he confirmed to the Israelis that the Palestinian would halt any step to join any international organization or treaty, he promised the Palestinians with the priority of discussion borders and security before any other issue (see Thrall 2017, 191-193).

Moreover, Kerry's proposal's outline was problematic and biased. In fact, it was warmed over of former failed peace initiatives (Ruebner, p. 55). This proposal included that between 75 and 80 percent of Israel's settler population would be annexed to Israel in settlements blocs. While the proposal denied the Palestinians' the right to sovereignty in Jerusalem, it talked about "Palestinian aspirations" for a capital in the holy city (Thrall, 2017, p. 203). Palestinians, also, would not have any sovereignty rights in the West Bank's borders with Jordan, as joint U.S. and Israeli forces would rule this region. It was remarkable also that the proposal ignored any discussion about the future situation of the Gaza strip. During the prolonged negotiations, Netanyahu, through the American team reintroduced his constant demand of the Palestinian recognition of Israel as a state of the Jewish people (See Ruebner, 2016, 55). This was in exchange for a proposed \$4 billion investment into the Palestinian economy to address rampant unemployment and sluggish economic growth in the Occupied Territories (MEPC, 2013). This inconsistent offer resonated the notion of economic peace that was mainly promoted by the left-wing Israeli governments and U.S. neo-conservative peace operatives.

Failure, therefore, was embedded in the very logic of this initiative. Kerry was not an impartial mediator, he did his best to meet Netanyahu's demands, avoiding pushing Israel to any choice that might break up his coalition (Thrall 2017, p. 203). For example, when Israel, against Kerry's trust-building measures, put forward plans for extensive settlement expansion for each Palestinian prisoner released, Kerry did no more than describe this expansion as "unhelpful" and "illegitimate," while justifying the sharp rise of the settlement during the negotiations as "expected," urging the Palestinians not to abandon the talks (Ibid). Palestinians, therefore, were not left with other choices but to leave the talks, as they realized the risk involved in accepting Kerry's offers. Mahmoud Abbas accused the United States of bending over backwards to appease Netanyahu and that this process would not lead to a peace agreement (Pressman, 2016).

But for Indyk (2014), both parties the Palestinians and the Israelis are to be blamed for the failure. In a speech delivered shortly before his resignation, to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Indyk pointed out that "It is easier for the Palestinians to sign conventions and appeal to international bodies in their supposed pursuit of 'justice' and their 'rights.'" a process, he argued, goes against the logic of negotiations' compromise. Also, "It is easier for Israeli politicians," he maintained, "to avoid tension in the governing coalition and for the Israeli people to maintain the current comfortable status quo" (Indyk, 2014). Whereas this speech placed the blame on both parties, it denied the Palestinians any alternative strategy to seek their rights. For Ruebner (2016, 55), this showed how far the Obama Administration had deviated from its initial goal of establishing a Palestinian state in an "expeditious manner."

Even though Kerry's peace proposal was so appealing for the Israelis, he, and Indyk, was not immune from the Israeli criticisms. For example, Israel's defense minister *Moshe Ya'lon* accused Kerry of having an "incomprehensible obsession" with his push for Middle East peace (Aljazeera, January 2014). On his side, Netanyahu reportedly said that he would not work again with Indyk as the latter placed disproportionate blame on Israel for the collapse of the peace talks (the Times of Israel, 2014).

Partially as a response to the collapse of peace talks, the two major Palestinian factions (Hamas and Fatah) agreed to reconcile for forming a national unity government in April 2014. The act that Israel strongly opposed, and used to justify the failure of the negotiations and to condemn Abbas government (Beck 2014, 4). To place more pressures on the Palestinian parties in both the West Bank and Gaza, Israel found in the killing of three Israeli civilians and a Palestinian attacker in Hebron a pretext to wage another war against Hamas. This third armed conflict between Hamas and Israel lasted between 8 July and 26 August 2014 (Sasch, 2014; Pressman 2016).

The punitive aggression against Gaza was a practical message to prove the end of the talks. But, it also exposed another dimension in the American peace policy under Obama, it has become full of contradictions. The Administration showed a conventional support to Israel in its massive retaliation that led to the deaths of more than 2,100 Palestinians in Gaza (Norman, 2016). Not only did Obama assert Israel's right to self-defense without reservations, but the US also continued to resupply the

Israeli military with ammunition. Also, during the war, the Congress signed off on \$225 million in aid for Israel to enhance its Iron Dome missile defense system (Everett, 2014).

b. UNSC 2334 Resolution: A Desperate Move

The UNSC resolution 2334 could be the final major act for Obama Administration on the stage of the conflict. Indeed, the US abstention from the vote played a decisive role in the adoption of the proposal with the approval of the rest of the UNSC members. However, to consider this resolution as an achievement in Obama's record is a controversial matter. Whereas the abstention carries some positive meaning by affirming international law as the solid framework of reference for resolving the conflict, starting with the implacable issue of settlements, the US official stance, as appears from its UN representative's statement, distances itself from the resolution and acts half-heartedly. Moreover, by this act, Obama as showing the US adherence to its long stance regarding the settlement policy, also aimed at disquieting both Trump and Netanyahu for several reasons, part of them related to Palestine issues.

The proposal on settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem was put forward by New Zealand, Malaysia, Venezuela and Senegal; a day after Egypt delayed it under pressure from Israel and US President-elect Donald Trump (Mada Masr 2016). It passed by a vote of 14-0, with the US abstaining (Aljazeera, 2016). The resolution came out in accordance with the UN stance as several UN member states already contend Israeli settlements violate the Fourth Geneva Convention's rules for administering occupied territory (Bloomberg, 2016).

By adopting the resolution, the UNSC reiterated its demand that Israel ceases all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territories immediately and completely, including East Jerusalem. It underlined that it would not recognize any changes to the 4 June 1967 lines, including about Jerusalem, other than those agreed by the two sides through negotiations. Moreover, the Council called for immediate steps to prevent all acts of violence against civilians, including acts of terror, as well as all acts of provocation and destruction. Finally, the Council called on sides to observe calm and restraint, refrain from provocative actions, and continues to exert collective efforts to launch credible negotiations on all final-status issues in the

Middle East peace process, within the time frame specified by the Middle East Quartet. (UN, SC/12657, 2016).

The resolution came out as a balanced act based on international law principles, as it equally addresses settlements and terrorist violence. However, the Israeli reaction was, as expected, the repudiation of the resolution as a “shameful anti-Israel resolution at the U.N. [Israeli] will not abide by its term,” said Netanyahu in an instant statement. Also, his government immediately started a diplomatic retaliation scheme against the states that proposed the resolution, New Zealand and Senegal in particular (*The New York Times*, 23 December 2016).

The Israeli position was backed by the then-president-elect Donald Trump who had previously intervened to convince the Egyptian President *Abdel Fattah El-Sisi* to withdraw the proposal put forward by the Egyptian delegation to the UNSC. Trump also criticized Obama and his Administration for the abstention, promising that things will change in favor of Israel and the US after his inauguration. Likewise, several senators and congressmen rebuked the Obama's Administration stance, saying that it should have vetoed the resolution (*The New York Times*, December 2016; Aljazeera, December 2016). However, the Administration stance and the resolution itself was welcomed by some new Jewish activist groups such as the J Street group which stated that the resolution “is consistent with longstanding bipartisan American policy, which includes strong support for the two-state solution, and clear opposition to irresponsible and damaging actions, including Palestinian incitement and terror and Israeli settlement expansion and home demolitions.” (J Street, 2016).

In her speech to the UNSC, Samantha Power, the US Permanent Representative to the UN, justified the balanced stance of the US regarding the resolution. Clarifying the reasons for the US abstention, Power thought that the resolution is a part of the UN general unbalanced attitude concerning Israel, criticizing it harshly in comparison to other states and cases, and ignoring the terrorism it is facing. However, the resolution, Power argued, is reflecting the facts on the ground where the "settlement problem has gotten so much worse that it is now putting at risk the very viability of that two-state solution". Therefore, the abstention, Power emphasized, is part of the constant formal American stance regarding the settlement as an illegal practice of occupation, and it is consistent with the attitude of

the former American Administrations since the 1960s. Power also criticized Netanyahu for having described his government as “more committed to settlements than any in Israel’s history”; while she condemned the PA for not taking real measures to stop the terrorist attacks against Israel and its citizens (Power, 2016).

Typically, Power’s statement was reflecting the official standpoint of Obama's Administration. The US abstention was decisive in having the resolution passed. However, the Administration acted as a "free rider" with the resolution. As a matter of fact, it did not participate in drafting it, and the proposal was not on the table of the discussion between Kerry and Suzan Rice, the National Security Advisor, in their meeting with the Palestinian officials in mid-December (Bercovici, 2017). While the concerned members state, Egypt at the beginning and New Zealand, Senegal, Venezuela and Malaysia, acted on their own; the Administration did not intervene in their discussions. So, Obama’s Administration kept its hands clean, but the resolution was an opportunity not to be missed to improve its record and to disturb its adversaries, especially Netanyahu and Trump.

So far, there have been several interpretations for Obama’s last move. Nevertheless, the motivations for Obama's late and desperate move can be explained by the following:

1. Obama's Administration had grown more concerned about the impact on settlements of the two-state solution as the essential tool for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution. As Power explained in her speech, in 2011, the United States vetoed a resolution that focused exclusively on settlements, because it dealt with the settlements as if they were they only factor harming the prospects of a two-state solution. But the circumstances have changed dramatically. Since 2011, settlement growth has only accelerated. And according to the report of the Middle East Quartet in July 2016, there had been a concern about the systematic process of land seizures, settlement expansions, and legalizations whereas Israel has been advancing its plans for more than 2,600 new settlement units (Power, 2016). So, having a UNSC resolution concerning the settlements passed is an American acknowledgement of the danger posed by the Israeli occupation policy to the peace process and its future.

2. The Administration had a profound sense of disappointment towards Netanyahu for his disturbing attitude in defying all the previous attempts to reach a resolution to the conflict, propagating against the nuclear deal inside the US, and endorsing Trump, and Mitt Romney before in the 2012 elections. So, the UNSC 2334 was an attempt to press a sensitive nerve of the Israeli government without using an American blade, but an international one; the international law, provided the international community's consistent stance against the settlements. In few words, Obama's abstention was a symbolic punishment to Netanyahu's arrogance. However, Obama was sure that Trump is close enough to Netanyahu to heal his wounded pride.
3. The Obama Administration's abstention can be seen as a means of reducing the damage that could be done by the upcoming Trump presidency, provided the widely held view that Trump may end up undoing decades of standing US policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (ACRPS, 2017). Therefore, if Trump tries to match his annoying statements with internationally condemned actions, through the UNSC; he might be constrained with the UNSC 2334 resolution.
4. Finally, believing in the creed of the two-state solution, the Obama Administration worried that the window of opportunity for a two-state solution might soon close. Given the facts of the Israeli government creeping towards a situation of permanent occupation, and the one-state solution is developing on the ground whereas Israel is governing not only the Palestinians of Israeli citizenship but the close to five million Palestinians who live in the Occupied Territories. As Kerry's December 28 speech made a direct allusion to the possibility that if Israeli settlement expansion is not suspended, "a future Israeli government would face the prospect of a wide-scale civil rights movement demanding equal voting rights for Palestinian in the West Bank" (ACRPS, 2017). Thus, the resolution was the last opportunity to confirm the belief in the centrality of the two-state solution.

Whatever, the motivations of Obama's abstention, it was not a significant change in the Administration's inactiveness. As Aronson (2016) put it "that moment is destined to pass. US support for the vote would not, in and of itself, have been a game

changer. Remember the Clinton parameters, an inexact, but far more prescriptive, a policy that fell from the tree almost as soon as it was ripe."

For adding some final items to its record, the Obama Administration took the last two symbolic actions: Kerry's bases of the solution and the financial transfer to the PA.

Following the debate over the UNSC 2334 resolution, on 28 December 2016, Secretary of State Kerry gave a speech in which he outlined a vision for peace between the Israelis and Palestinians. In his speech, Kerry warned against the end of the two-state solution because of the settler agenda that defines the future of Israel. The purpose of this agenda is clear "they believe in one state: Greater Israel... If the choice is one state, Israel can either be Jewish or democratic, it cannot be both, and it won't ever really be at peace" (Aljazeera, 28 December 2016).

According to Kerry's speech, the fundamental bases of the solution are:

1. "Principle one; provide for secure and recognized international borders between Israel and a viable and contiguous Palestine negotiated based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed equivalent swaps."
2. "Principle two; fulfill the vision of the U.N. General Assembly Resolution 181 of two states for two peoples, one Jewish and one Arab, with mutual recognition and full equal rights for all their respective citizens."
3. "Principle three; provide for a just, agreed, fair and realistic solution to the Palestinian refugee issue."
4. "Principal four; provide an agreed solution for Jerusalem as the internationally recognized capital of the two states and protect and ensure freedom of access to the holy sites consistent with the established status quo."
5. "Principle five; satisfy Israel's security needs and bring a full end, ultimately, to the occupation. While ensuring Israel can defend itself effectively and that Palestine can provide security for its people in a sovereign and non-militarized state.." (Kerry, 2016).

To a larger extent, Kerry's principles are echoing Clinton's parameters, and both are last-ditch effort to offer peace. Nonetheless, Clinton's parameters were accepted with some reservations from both sides, and they found their pathways into the later negotiations in *Taba* talks in January 2001 and ruined by the eruption of violence in the second intifada, and finally they were translated into the Bush Administration's first American explicit call for an independent Palestinian state in January 2002 and in the Road Map in April 2003 (CFR, 2005). But with the coming of Trump Administration in 2017, the likelihood of enforcing Kerry's principles into diplomatic efforts is very low.

After Obama had left his office on 20 January 2017, reports unveiled that he released \$ 221 million to the PA. This sum of money was a part of aid provided by the US to the West Bank and Gaza and totaled about \$ 355 million in 2015. However, the funding was frozen by a congressional act as some senators and representatives accused the PA of unilateral attempt at statehood, corruption, incitement of violence and paying salaries to people imprisoned for committing terror acts (Lockie, 2017). While the resale was seen as necessary support for the PA and its head Mahmoud Abbas who are undergoing hard times, from the side of the Israeli government and from within Fatah and its internal struggle, others regarded it as a strange and message. No matter what the interpretations of this act, it remains symbolic, if not confusing, and without practical implications on the ground.

VII. Conclusions: Implications for the Future

In dealing with the century-long conflict in Palestine/ Israel, Obama was not that radical that had been thought to be. Before being the 44th of the United States, Obama had a balanced vision of the conflict, yet he lacked the practical sense in translating it into out of the box policies. Accordingly, when he assumed the office he adopted the same playbook that was defined by the Camp David-Madrid-Oslo framework. Although he was a great believer in the “peace process” and its significance for the American national interests in the Middle East, he was not resilient in front of the structures that defied his belief. By time, he gave up his balanced vision, and became more pro-Israeli. That was evident in his political rhetoric and diplomatic and military support to Tel Aviv, even during its aggressions against the sieged Gaza Strip in 2012 and 2014. His personal disdain of the Netanyahu right wing government did not change this course. Rather it contributed to his Administration poor record.

Obama’s initial good intentions were defeated by the turmoil in the Middle East, and the nature of his Administration’s relations with Israel. In fact, these structural changes pushed Obama from the position of sympathetic realism, where he balanced between the rights of the Palestinians and the need for security for Israel, to be more pro-Israel, accepting the Israeli narrative, dropping the stress on the rights of the Palestinians. By the end of his tenure, the prevalent notion among the Administration’s officials, including Kerry and Power was “saving Israel from itself.” this notion revokes the deep-seated notion of advocating Israel and protecting it, even from the wrong deeds in inflicted on others and on itself. This rhetoric, in which the rights of the Palestinians and their agonies were overshadowed, was an emphasis on how far was the change in perception, compared by the promising beginning.

Yet Obama’s choices contributed to the failure of brokering peace. First, when peace was priority, he lacked the strategy in handling the difficulties, in particular the challenges that were posed by Netanyahu. That was clear in the first take over the settlement. Second, the lack of strategy also was manifested in his bureaucratic choice of the peace operatives, where most of them were pro-Israelis, embracers who believed that peace could only be achieved through more concessions to Israel and more support to its right wing government. The failures of Mitchell

peace mission (2009-2011) and Kerry's negotiations (2013-2014) were natural products of these flaws. Obama's final take on the conflict, the abstention that led to the UNSC resolution 2334, was also a manifestation of the lack of choices he had by the end of his tenure, and the long lack of audacity in translating visions for peace into solid actions.

By the end of his Administration, it was clear that the American sponsored peace process was in a critical situation, it took only Donald Trump to prevent any hope of reviving it. Unlike Obama who came in with great expectations that went unfulfilled, Trump came against the background of great fears that have been proved right over year. He has shown by far unwavering support to Israel and personal affinity with its like-minded right wing Netanyahu government. Trump, with a great sense of businessman, started by confirming his ability to "get it done" as "[the conflict] is not as difficult as people have thought." While he has been talking about a deal to end the conflict, he got closer to the same American playbook of making deals in the conflict. Moreover, he was confused about the nature of the deal, whether it is to set up one state or two states. Trump showed little enthusiasm for the two-state solution that has underpinned the American policy since the launching of the peace process in 1991. Instead, he said he is fine with the "two-state" or the "one state" (Landler 2017). Netanyahu, in return, has become more certain of the true friendship of Trump with the "Jewish State." Some observers saw trump's tricky language of the nature of the solution in his deal as an implicit declaration of the end of the "peace process myth" (Khalidi, 2017).

The end of the peace process has become increasingly shared belief among the observers (see Elgindy 2017; Cohen 2017) as they have grown skeptical about Trump's ambiguous ultimate deal to deliver. Yet the final deathblow was Trump's declaration that the United States will recognize Jerusalem as the Capital of the state of Israel on 6 December 2017. The decision unleashed international outcry and condemnation, and caused violent protests in the occupied lands (Chacar 2017). Whereas it was clearly meant to satisfy Trump's white evangelical constituency, it was revealing announcement with great significance to the American role in the so-called "peace process." In fact, it was necessary to demystify the myth.

The decision that will be implemented in May 2018 disqualified the United States as the honest broker of peace in Palestine/ Israel, as it violated international law. But in fact, the United States has never been that honest broker of peace; it has always favored the Israelis over the Palestinians, for strategic, domestic and sentimental reasons, even during the Obama Administration. The American establishment, media and large parts of the society are blinded by disdain for the Palestinians, denying of their rights and ignoring of their miserable situation under the fifty-year occupation. That was the crux of the myth that should have revealed since the start of the peace process. The unconditional American support of Israel made Netanyahu declare that no international party that the United States is qualified to mediate peace (Netanyahu 2018).

As the peace process under the Obama Administration has shown, Washington was not able to force any agreement, or even to convince the involved parties of any of its initiatives. As Shlomo Ben Ami (2017, 41) put it “Washington gave the parties in the conflict the sense that American Power lacked resolve and conviction. It no longer intimidates, not even allies and client such as Palestinian Authority” Therefore, it is safe to argue that now it is the right time to introduce a new paradigm for peace in Palestine Israel that should be based on ending the American monopoly over the peace process, and to invent a new paradigm for reaching peace that goes beyond the domestic necessities of the domestic politics of one state, the US.

This new paradigm shall take in consideration the change of the power balance in the world order and its implications for the region. Having said that peace in Palestine needs an international solution involves the United States, as it is still an indispensable actor in the Middle East and beyond. An international management of the conflict will convince the Israeli government to take more viable concessions into the road to peace, and the Palestinians to unite behind universally recognized peace initiatives.

Part of that is to put to question the premises on which the American peace process was built, particularly the principle of “peace for land” that implies that controlling lands by the Israelis is justifiable so they can exchange them for peace. It was this implicit belief that shaped the US brokering for peace since the 1970s. In

fact, this principle was built on logical fallacy, since the land is quantifiable while peace is not. So, the new paradigm shall be based on more logical formula stress “peace for peace”

Most importantly, a new paradigm for peace in Palestine shall emphasize the role of the involved parties, rather than the outsider parties, in achieving peace. Any plea for peace will be useless unless the Israelis and the Palestinians are willing and able to make concessions to the other party on just basis, and make compromise within each camp.

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