

Obama on the Middle East

I. Israel-Palestine

- [Iowa speech from the Des Moines Register](#); May 3rd, 2007:

“...I think both sides acknowledge now that if there's going to be peace it's going to be centered on a two-state solution.”

“Now, in the interim, nobody's suffering more than the Palestinian people from this whole process. And I would like to see -- if we could get some movement from Palestinian leadership -- what I'd like to see is a loosening up of some of the restrictions on providing aid directly to the Palestinian people.

I was in the West Bank and Ramallah, and it's very challenging. And I think you can get a sympathetic perspective both within Israel and from the U.S. and the Europeans if you have Hamas acknowledge that the road to peace is not going go through -- it's not going to go through terrorism and other violence.”

- [Jeffrey Goldberg Interview](#); May 12th, 2008, The Atlantic Online:

Goldberg: If you become President, will you denounce settlements publicly?

Obama: What I will say is what I've said previously. Settlements at this juncture are not helpful. Look, my interest is in solving this problem not only for Israel but for the United States.

Goldberg: “Do you think that Israel is a drag on America’s reputation overseas?”

Obama: “No, no, no. But what I think is that this constant wound, that this constant sore, does infect all of our foreign policy. The lack of a resolution to this problem provides an excuse for anti-American militant jihadists to engage in inexcusable actions, and so we have a national-security interest in solving this, and I also believe that Israel has a security interest in solving this because I believe that the status quo is unsustainable. I am absolutely convinced of that, and some of the tensions that might arise between me and some of the more hawkish elements in the Jewish community in the United States might stem from the fact that I'm not going to blindly adhere to whatever the most hawkish position is just because that's the safest ground politically.

I want to solve the problem, and so my job in being a friend to Israel is partly to hold up a mirror and tell the truth and say if Israel is building settlements without any regard to the effects that this has on the peace process, then we're going to be stuck in the same status quo that we've been stuck in for decades now..."

Obama: "...That does not mean that I would agree with every action of the state of Israel, because it's a government and it has politicians, and as a politician myself I am deeply mindful that we are imperfect creatures and don't always act with justice uppermost on our minds. But the fundamental premise of Israel and the need to preserve a Jewish state that is secure is, I think, a just idea and one that should be supported here in the United States and around the world."

Obama: "When I visited Ramallah, among a group of Palestinian students, one of the things that I said to those students was: "Look, I am sympathetic to you and the need for you guys to have a country that can function, but understand this: if you're waiting for America to distance itself from Israel, you are delusional. Because my commitment, our commitment, to Israel's security is non-negotiable."

- [Amman, Jordan Speech](#); July 22nd, 2008, New York Times:

OBAMA: "...And I do believe that an ultimate resolution is going to involve two states standing side by side in peace and security, and that the Israelis and the Palestinians are going to both have to make compromises in order to arrive at that two-state solution."

OBAMA: "...What I think can change is the ability of the United States government and a United States president to be actively engaged with the peace process and to be concerned and recognize the legitimate difficulties that the Palestinian people are experiencing right now.

And recognize that it is not only in the interest of the Palestinian people that their situation improves, I believe it's also in the interest of the Israeli people, because it is going to be very difficult for Israel ever to feel secure if you don't have some sense of opportunity and prosperity and stability with its -- its neighbors.

And so, you know, my goal is to make sure that we work, starting from the minute I'm sworn into office, to try to find some breakthroughs.

Now, the other thing I have to make a point though is that everybody's going to have responsibilities and obligations in this process. And sometimes I think there's a tendency for each side to focus on the faults of the other instead of looking in the mirror and saying, what can be done to improve the situation?

So, for example, I think with respect to the Palestinians, obviously **it is very important to resolve the internal differences between the Palestinians**. It's going to be very difficult for the Israelis to resolve a significant peace agreement if they don't know who they should be dealing with and who can actually enforce an agreement. But I just use that as one example.

- [2008 AIPAC speech](#); June 4th, 2008, Washington, DC:

“Across the political spectrum, Israelis understand that real security can only come through lasting peace. And that is why we — as friends of Israel — must resolve to do all we can to help Israel and its neighbors to achieve it. Because a secure, lasting peace is in Israel's national interest. It is in America's national interest. And it is in the interest of the Palestinian people and the Arab world. As president, I will work to help Israel achieve the goal of two states, a Jewish state of Israel and a Palestinian state, living side by side in peace and security. And I won't wait until the waning days of my presidency. I will take an active role, and make a personal commitment to do all I can to advance the cause of peace from the start of my administration.

...Israel can also advance the cause of peace by taking appropriate steps — consistent with its security — to ease the freedom of movement for Palestinians, improve economic conditions in the West Bank, and to refrain from building new settlements — as it agreed to with the Bush administration at Annapolis. Let me be clear. Israel's security is sacrosanct. It is non-negotiable. The Palestinians need a state that is contiguous and cohesive, and that allows them to prosper — but any agreement with the Palestinian people must preserve Israel's identity as a Jewish state, with secure, recognized and defensible borders.”

- [2007 AIPAC speech](#); March 2nd, 2007, Chicago, Illinois:

“We can and we should help Israelis and Palestinians both fulfill their national goals: two states living side by side in peace and security. Both the Israeli and Palestinian people have suffered from the failure to achieve this goal. The United States should leave no stone unturned in working to make that goal a reality....Diplomacy in the Middle East cannot be done on the cheap. Diplomacy is measured by patience and effort. We cannot continue to have trips consisting of little more than photo-ops with little movement in between. Neither Israel nor the U.S. is served by this approach.”

“For six years, the administration has missed opportunities to increase the United States' influence in the region and help Israel achieve the peace she wants and the security she needs. The time has come for us to seize those opportunities.”

- [Speech to Cleveland Jewish Community](#); February 25th, 2008:

“I think there is a strain within the pro-Israel community that says unless you adopt a unwavering pro-Likud approach to Israel that you’re anti-Israel and that can’t be the measure of our friendship with Israel. If we cannot have an honest dialogue about how do we achieve these goals, then we’re not going to make progress.”

“Well here's my starting orientation is A - Israel's security is sacrosanct, is non negotiable. That's point number one. Point number two is that the status quo I believe is unsustainable over time. So we're going to have to make a shift from the current deadlock that we're in. Number three that Israel has to remain a Jewish state and what I believe that means is that any negotiated peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians is going to have to involve the Palestinians relinquishing the right of return as it has been understood in the past. And that doesn't mean that there may not be conversations about compensation issues. It also means the Israelis will have to figure out how do we work with a legitimate Palestinian government to create a Palestinian state that is sustainable. It's going to have to be contiguous, it's going to have to work its going to have to function in some way. That's in Israel's interest by the way. If you have a balkanized unsustainable state, it will break down and we will be back in the same boat. So those are the starting points of my orientation. My goal then would be to solicit as many practical opinions as possible in terms of how we're going to move forward on a improvement of relations and a sustainable peace. The question that I will be asking any advisor is how does it achieve the goal of Israel's security and how does it achieve the goal of sustainability over the long term and I want practical, hardheaded, unromantic advice about how we're going to achieve that.

“One last point I'll make on this, in terms of advisors and the kind of debate I think is fruitful, one of the things that struck me when I went to Israel was how much more open the debate was around these issues in Israel than they are sometimes here in the United States. It's very ironic. I sat down with the head of Israeli security forces and his view of the Palestinians was incredibly nuanced because he's dealing with these people every day. There's good and there's bad, and he was willing to say sometimes we make mistakes and we made this miscalculation and if we are just pressing down on these folks constantly without giving them some prospects for hope, that's not good for our security situation. There was a very honest, thoughtful debate taking place inside Israel. All of you, I'm sure, have experienced this when you travel there. Understandably, because of the pressure that Israel is under, I think the U.S. pro-Israel community is sometimes a little more protective or concerned about opening up that conversation.”

- July 24th, 2008; [Jerusalem Post interview](#):

Question: The American position has been blanketly opposed to settlement construction. Do you think Israel has a right to try and maintain a presence in the West Bank - for security, religious, historic or other reasons?

Obama: “I think that Israel should abide by previous agreements and commitments that have been made, and aggressive settlement construction would seem to violate the spirit at least, if not the letter, of agreements that have been made previously.

Israel's security concerns, I think, have to be taken into account, via negotiation. I think the parties in previous discussions have stated that settlement construction doesn't necessarily contribute to that enhanced security. I think there are those who would argue that the more settlements there are, the more Israel has to invest in protecting those settlements and the more tensions arise that may undermine Israel's long-term security.

Ultimately, though, these are part of the discussions that have to take place between the parties. But I think that, based on what's previously been said, for Israel to make sure that it is aligned with those previous statements is going to be helpful to the process.”

- [Obama interview with Fareed Zakaria on CNN](#); July 13, 2008:

ZAKARIA: One area where you're outside the international consensus -- and certainly, perhaps, some others -- is the statement you made in a recent speech supporting Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel.

Now, why not support the Clinton plan, which envisions a divided Jerusalem, the Arab half being the capital of a Palestinian state, the Jewish half being the capital of the Jewish state?

OBAMA: You know, the truth is that this was an example where we had some poor phrasing in the speech. And we immediately tried to correct the interpretation that was given. The point we were simply making was, is that we don't want barbed wire running through Jerusalem, similar to the way it was prior to the '67 war, that it is possible for us to create a Jerusalem that is cohesive and coherent.

I was not trying to predetermine what are essentially final status issues. I think the Clinton formulation provides a starting point for discussions between the parties.

And it is an example of us making sure that we are careful in terms of our syntax. But the intention was never to move away from that basic, core idea that they -- that those parties are going to have to negotiate these issues on their own, with the strong engagement of the United States.

And if you look at the overall tenor of that speech and what I've said historically about this issue, you know, Israel has an interest not just in bunkering down. They've got to recognize that their long-term viability as a Jewish state is going to depend on their ability to create peace with their neighbors.

II. Syria

- [2008 AIPAC speech](#) , June 4th, 2008, Washington, DC:

“I also believe that the United States has a responsibility to support Israel's efforts to renew peace talks with the Syrians. We must never force Israel to the negotiating table, but neither should we ever block negotiations when Israel's leaders decide that they may serve Israeli interests.”

- July 24th, 2008; [Jerusalem Post interview](#):

Question: Tell me about Syria: Israel is now in indirect talks with Syria. Would you as president directly re-engage with Damascus even if it hadn't changed its position on hosting terror groups and so on?

Obama: “My general view is that initiating direct contacts between the United States and other countries is a generally smart practice - if nothing else just to get better intelligence on what they are thinking, on what their approaches are, what their calculations are, what their interests are. I think that based on conversations I've had here in Israel as well as conversations with leaders elsewhere in the region, there is the possibility at least that the Syrian government genuinely seeks to break out of the isolation. What price they are willing to pay to break out of that isolation, is an unanswered question. It's worth exploring.

And if in fact there are some genuine signals that Syria is willing to drive out terrorists in their midst, shut down the arms flow into Lebanon, or to otherwise engage in more responsible behavior, I think it could be a shift in the region that would be extremely advantageous.”

III. Iran/Iraq/General Mideast Region

- [2008 AIPAC speech](#); June 4th, 2008, Washington, DC:

“Because of the war in Iraq, Iran – which always posed a greater threat to Israel than Iraq – is emboldened, and poses the greatest strategic challenge to the United States and Israel in the Middle East in a generation. Iraq is unstable, and al Qaeda has stepped up its recruitment. Israel's quest for peace with its neighbors has stalled, despite the heavy burdens borne by the Israeli people. And America is more isolated in the region, reducing our strength and jeopardizing Israel's safety.”

“But just as we are clear-eyed about the threat, we must be clear about the failure of today's policy. We knew, in 2002, that Iran supported terrorism. We knew Iran had an illicit nuclear program. We knew Iran posed a grave threat to Israel. But instead of pursuing a strategy to address this threat, we ignored it and instead invaded and occupied Iraq. When I opposed the war, I warned that it would fan the flames of extremism in the Middle East. That is precisely what happened in Iran – the hardliners tightened their grip, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected President in 2005. And the United States and Israel are less secure.”

“Only recently have some come to think that diplomacy by definition cannot be tough. They forget the example of Truman, and Kennedy and Reagan. These Presidents understood that diplomacy backed by real leverage was a fundamental tool of statecraft. And it is time to once again make American diplomacy a tool to succeed, not just a means of containing failure. We will pursue this diplomacy with no illusions about the Iranian regime. Instead, we will present a clear choice. If you abandon your dangerous nuclear program, support for terror, and threats to Israel, there will be meaningful incentives – including the lifting of sanctions, and political and economic integration with the international community. If you refuse, we will ratchet up the pressure.”

- [2007 AIPAC speech](#); March 2nd, 2007, Chicago, Illinois:

“And my plan includes a robust regional diplomatic strategy that includes talking to Syria and Iran - something this Administration has finally embraced.”

“One of the heavy stones that currently rest at the United States' feet is Iraq. Until we lift this burden from our foreign policy, we cannot rally the world to our values and vision. As many of you know, I opposed this war from the beginning - in part because I believed that giving this President the open-ended authority to invade Iraq would lead to the open-ended occupation we find ourselves in today... This war has fueled terrorism and helped galvanize terrorist organizations. And it has made the world less safe.”

- [Obama's speech to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#); April 23rd, 2007:

“Burdened by Iraq, our lackluster diplomatic efforts leave a huge void. Our interests are best served when people and governments from Jerusalem and Amman to Damascus and Tehran understand that America will stand with our friends, work hard to build a peaceful Middle East, and refuse to cede the future of the region to those who seek perpetual conflict and instability. Such effective diplomacy cannot be done on the cheap, nor can it be warped by an ongoing occupation of Iraq. Instead, it will require patient, sustained effort, and the personal commitment of the President of the United States. That is a commitment I intend to make.”

- [‘Renewing American Leadership’](#) by Barack Obama; Foreign Affairs July/August 2007:

“The morass in Iraq has made it immeasurably harder to confront and work through the many other problems in the region -- and it has made many of those problems considerably more dangerous. Changing the dynamic in Iraq will allow us to focus our attention and influence on resolving the festering conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians -- a task that the Bush administration neglected for years... Throughout the Middle East, we must harness American power to reinvigorate American diplomacy. Tough-minded diplomacy, backed by the whole range of instruments of American power -- political, economic, and military -- could bring success even when dealing with long-standing adversaries such as Iran and Syria. Our policy of issuing threats and relying on intermediaries to curb Iran's nuclear program, sponsorship of terrorism, and regional aggression is failing. Although we must not rule out using military force, we should not hesitate to talk directly to Iran. Our diplomacy should aim to raise the cost for Iran of continuing its nuclear program by applying tougher sanctions and increasing pressure from its key trading partners. The world must work to stop Iran's uranium-enrichment program and prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. It is far too dangerous to have nuclear weapons in the hands of a radical theocracy. At the same time, we must show Iran -- and especially the Iranian people -- what could be gained from fundamental change: economic engagement, security assurances, and diplomatic relations. Diplomacy combined with pressure could also reorient Syria away from its radical agenda to a more moderate stance -- which could, in turn, help stabilize Iraq, isolate Iran, free Lebanon from Damascus' grip, and better secure Israel.”