

**COMMENTARY**

**By Dr Hanan Chehata**

On the article "*Palestinians should trust Obama*" written by the American Task Force on Palestine's President Ziad Asali, as reported in the [Arab News](#) Oct, 4th 2009

The President of The American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP), Ziad Asali, recently published an article entitled "*Palestinians should trust Obama.*" This is a fairly loaded and contentious title and before even reading the first sentence a series of questions immediately spring to mind. Why should Palestinians trust Obama? What has he done for them? What is he doing for them? What will he do for them?



Having witnessed the terrible impact that the Bush legacy has left resonating across the globe, it is not hard to understand people's trepidation about his successor, whoever he might be. It seems only natural to be cautiously pessimistic. But is that fair to Obama? Has he tried hard enough to get out of the shadow left by his predecessor? Granted he has only been in office for a relatively short period of time since his inauguration on 20th January 2009, but since then what has his approach been towards Palestine?

When it became clear that Obama was a serious candidate for the presidency, hopes seemed high, particularly in the Muslim world. Maybe this was to be the American leader who would finally usher in a new era of peace in the Middle East and restore a much needed sense of balance to the region. A man who himself came from a culturally diverse background would surely understand the evils of racism and stand against the tide of colonialism and oppression. Here was a man with familial ties to Islam and the name Hussein no less! It seemed reasonable to expect that things could only get better.

However, in the time since he has come to the world's attention, Obama has had countless opportunities to earn the trust of the Palestinian people and to speak out against the horrors being perpetrated against them by the Israeli government and its military forces. But has he taken those opportunities? Obama occupies the world's most powerful podium but has he used that power to show himself to be a true friend of the Palestinians as Ziad Asali suggests?

Some of the major recent events to have occurred in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have surely left serious doubts in the minds of even the most staunch Obama supporters with regards to his commitment towards the Palestinian people. Such events include the Israeli assault on Gaza between December 2008 to January 2009, the tripartite New York Conference and the publication of the landmark Goldstone Report. In addition to these seminal events is the continuous siege on the Gaza



Strip, the ongoing building of illegal Israeli settlements and the continual abuse of the Palestinian people by the Israeli government. Has Obama's reaction to any of these events given the Palestinians any reason to trust him?

**Rhetoric in the run up to the elections and his inauguration.**

Bearing the true hallmark of any *"good" politician, Obama has shown the ability, at times, to please both camps with his rhetoric. In his recent address to the Muslim world in Cairo (4th June 2009), for instance, he declared that he had gone there "to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect."* He quoted verses from the Holy Quran regarding the importance of speaking up for the truth, all of which led to high expectations around the Muslim world that he was truly spearheading a new era of understanding and political and religious good will. However, he has not allowed us to lose sight of the fact that beneath all that political rhetoric lies America's, and intrinsically the President's, unwavering and entrenched support for the Israeli project.

Obama's passionate courtship of the pro-Israeli lobby in the long run up to the US Presidential elections should have been the first indication that he was not going to be the US leader that so many had hoped would finally stand up to Israel. In a speech he gave to The American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in Chicago on March 2nd 2007, Obama affirmed his dedication as a supporter of Israel. Referring to the *"strong and lasting friendship between Israel and the U.S"* he emphasised the importance of America's *"clear and strong commitment to the security of Israel, our strongest ally in the region and its only established democracy."* He added, *"We must preserve our total commitment to our unique defence relationship with Israel by fully funding military assistance and continuing work on the Arrow and related missile defence programmes."* He made no reference to the illegal construction of the wall dividing Palestinian families from their loved ones; the illegal settlements; the continued siege under which the Palestinian people are forced to live nor any of the other things that might have jeopardised his wooing of the Zionist constituents. This is hardly surprising however, as without the public relations support and financial backing of the Pro-Israeli lobby, neither he nor anybody else, would stand a chance of being elected to the highest office in the world.

Just prior to his inauguration as the 44th President of the United States, Israel launched its 22 day assault on Gaza, (it conveniently ended just days prior to his inauguration). Even as the Gaza Massacre unfolded (December 2008-January 2009), Obama was relatively quiet on the issue declaring that there could only be one President at a time and that was not yet him. However, he certainly did not take the opportunity to show the Palestinians that they could trust him and that he would protect them. It was only reluctantly, when he was forced to give his reaction, that he made any reference to the assault at all.



### **The tripartite New York meeting and a settlement solution.**

Following Obama's speech to the Muslim world in Cairo (June 4th 2009), hopes were high that he would follow his positive words with positive action. Obama stated that *"there can be no progress towards peace without a halt to such construction"* - a reference to Israeli settlement activity in the Occupied West Bank. Given his commitment to peace, it seemed only natural that his next step would be to ensure the halt of all such construction. This should not be too difficult a position for him to adopt considering the fact that the settlements are a phenomenon which are almost universally accepted to be in breach of international and humanitarian laws.

One of Obama's first major opportunities to achieve this, and many other goals, came when he arranged a tripartite meeting in New York between Mahmoud Abbas (the President of the Palestinian Authority), Benjamin Netanyahu (The Israeli Prime Minister) and himself. The driving force behind the meeting was evidently meant to be one of promoting dialogue and cooperation and kicking off the stalled peace talks between the Palestinians and the Israelis. However, it backfired. Having told Netanyahu to *"freeze"* the building of all new settlements, he was openly defied by the Israeli Prime Minister and was met with a blanket rejection.

Some might suggest that Obama's reaction to this blatant lack of cooperation from the Israelis to end the practice of illegal settlement building should have been met, at the very least, with the threat of some form of punitive action taken against Israel, such as the imposition of economic sanctions. Instead, however, in the face of such embarrassing opposition from his ally, Obama later softened his approach by downgrading his words from a *"freeze"* to a more general restriction on settlement construction instead. Ziad Asali declares in his article that Obama is *"ready to take political risks"* to make a two state solution a reality. However, we have yet to see any evidence of any great political risks. The outcome of what could have been a landmark meeting simply served to show that Israel is now, more than ever, a law unto itself and that even America can no longer be relied upon to be able to reign Israel in.

### **Obama's two state solution.**

Ziad Asali writes that *"the status Quo - a one-state reality with that state occupying another, stateless, people - cannot be sustained."* This certainly seems to be Obama's position as well and he has been extremely vocal about his commitment to a two state solution. But is a two state solution in the best interests of the Palestinian people? Is it even what they want? Although Obama seems committed to that idea as the only tenable solution, it is a solution that most Palestinians and many supporters of Palestine flatly reject as an option and in fact they see it as working against the Palestinian interest and in favour of the Zionist cause. This is because the decision to declare a portion of land as *"Palestinian"* will only serve to confirm that they have no legitimate claim to the rest of their homeland thus lending further legitimacy and credibility to the Israeli claim over land that they have taken by force and erected settlements over. (The untenable nature of a two state solution has been widely explored by many academics, politicians and historians in great detail elsewhere.)



## Conclusion

I am not going to say one way or another whether the Palestinian people should or should not trust Obama. That is for them to decide. All I would say, however, is that looking at his track record so far, although there may have been a major change in rhetoric, there does not seem to have been any great shift in practice since the last administration.

On the other hand, however, as to whether or not Ziad Asali's declaration that "*Palestinians should trust Obama*" is an overly optimistic one, well perhaps it is. However, it is still early days in the Obama administration. He has only been in the White House for a matter of months and he does have his hands rather full with other US entanglements in global conflicts right now. There's the small matter of Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and oh, a few others. Furthermore, the conflict in Palestine is coming up to one hundred years old, so maybe we should be patient and give him a little more time to try to come to terms with the suffering and horror that has been brought to bear on the indigenous people of Palestine and allow him time to formulate a more realistic and fair policy for them. However, there is no doubt that if he is to earn the trust of the Palestinian people, he will need to do far more for them than he has done to date.

As for the overall tone of Ziad Asali's article, his basic assertion is that "*what we have now in this president and his administration... is a leadership that offers the right policy and political will that might save the Israelis and Palestinians from their dysfunctional relationship.*" Given that Ziad Asali's audience is a primarily American-Arab one and given the tensions felt by Muslim's living in the West over the last few years as a direct result of American foreign policy and given that there has been a shift in power in the US, maybe now is the time for optimism. If not now, when? At the very least we should give President Obama credit where it is due. At least he has moved away from the "*you are either with us or against us*" rhetoric of his predecessor and Obama's stated goal of peace is surely a noble one. However, in order to see this goal succeed he must make sure that peace is not sought at the expense of the Palestinian people.

Countless opportunities will continue to present themselves to Obama on a daily basis through which he could potentially earn the trust of the Palestinian people. Even as I write this article, the Israeli military is engaging in extremely inflammatory behaviour at the site of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Behaviour which is spreading outrage and consternation throughout the Muslim world, but will Obama speak out against the latest Israeli atrocities? It will be up to Obama to use, or ignore, opportunities such as this to make a stand for the Palestinian people and show them that he is someone that they can trust.

