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**Will Obama Save the Mideast from Itself?**  
**Color of Law**  
**By David A. Love, JD**  
**BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**



**Mark Thompson interviews David A. Love**  
**Thursday, June 11, 2009 - 7pm ET**

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With his speech at Cairo University, President Obama has laid the groundwork, potentially, for a new era of peace in the Mideast. Israeli officials are now realizing that [they will have to accept a two-state solution](#) for Israel and the Palestinians. Meanwhile, there is an indication that the President's speech is paving the way for waning animosity towards America in the Muslim world, which would [undercut the activities of extremist groups](#) that benefit from continued violence, hostility and death in that region of the world.

Well, it is about time. The past administration, whose name I dare not utter for fear it will reappear, paid nothing but lip service to the Mideast. The former president gave a rubber stamp to the status quo, and endorsed Israeli incursions and military strong-arming in the name of the war on terror. That rightwing faux fundamentalist Christian

occupant of the White House from 2001 until this past January—and his constituency for that matter—really cared very little about Jewish people. Little that is, except under the fundamentalist concept of the so-called rapture, or end times, in which Jesus returns and Jews who don't convert to Christianity will supposedly perish, or so the mythology goes. And that is the nonsense that governed Mideast policy for a decade. But I digress...

The Obama speech was a game changer because he accomplished a number of things: he presented a humbler and more contrite America, one which comes to the Muslim world with respect. With that respect, however, came a stern message. Obama discussed the long history of persecution of the Jewish people. Centuries of anti-Semitism culminated in the Holocaust, including the network of death camps—including Buchenwald, which Obama recently visited—that murdered 6 million Jews. "Threatening Israel with destruction -- or repeating vile stereotypes about Jews -- is deeply wrong, and only serves to evoke in the minds of Israelis this most painful of memories while preventing the peace that the people of this region deserve," the President emphasized.

Addressing Israel, Obama declared that the growth of the settlements in the West Bank must end. To the Palestinians, he acknowledged their "intolerable" suffering, but suggested that violence will not work. Borrowing from the African American and South African experience, he noted that things changed for Black people not through violence, but fighting for and demanding their rights:

*Resistance through violence and killing is wrong and does not succeed. For centuries, black people in America suffered the lash of the whip as slaves and the humiliation of segregation. But it was not violence that won full and equal rights. It was a peaceful and determined insistence upon the ideals at the center of America's founding. This same story can be told by people from South Africa to South Asia; from Eastern Europe to Indonesia. It's a story with a simple truth: that violence is a dead end. It is a sign of neither courage nor power to shoot rockets at sleeping children, or to blow up old women on a bus. That is not how moral authority is claimed; that is how it is surrendered.*

Now, Obama is what some folks would call a real *mensch*, which is Yiddish for a man of integrity and honor. He laid it out on the table, seemingly without attachments to the way things were done in the past. Surely, he realizes that U.S. policy towards the Mideast must change, and the country must exert some positive leadership. (Whether Obama decides to resist the urge for a Bush-lite policy with empire building in Afghanistan and Pakistan remains to be seen.)

Palestinians cannot sustain any more of an occupation that crushes the spirit and any sense of civil society, and Israelis can no longer pretend that they will ever feel safe, secure and free as long as they subjugate another people with Bantustans, checkpoints and identity cards. The hardliners, the base of Netanyahu's coalition government, want nothing less than to keep building the settlements. Will the parties come to their senses and come to the table? Time will tell. "Too many tears have flowed. Too much blood has been shed," as Obama said. "All of us have a responsibility to work for the day when the mothers of Israelis and Palestinians can see their children grow up without fear."

I decided to take a survey of some of the voices in the U.S. and the Mideast in response to Obama's Cairo visit. There are many thoughtful voices out there, to be sure, and some not so much. For example, [130 protestors protested at the American](#)

[consulate](#) in Jerusalem, chanting "20 new 'settlements' by 2010 - Yes We Can!" A rightwing group plans to disseminate a poster around Israel depicting Obama wearing a kaffiyeh, with the caption reading "Barak (sic) Hussein Obama, Anti-Semitic Jew-Hater."

Meanwhile, progressive journalists Max Blumenthal and Joseph Dana decided to go through the streets of Jerusalem and [interview young Israelis and American Jews](#) on their feelings about the President. They were met with racist invective and violently offensive language from these young people in their twenties, many of whom are Americans studying in Israel. Their statements, caught on video, drip with a sense of visceral hatred and entitlement. And Blumenthal is concerned that many American Jews harbor such troubling views about Israeli politics:

- "He's an asshole and deserves to get shot," said one young man.
- "White power, f\*ck the n\*ggers!" said another.
- "Oh he's a Muslim for sure! And who even knows if he was born in the United States?" said one young woman, a political science major, who admitted she did not know who Benjamin Netanyahu is. "We haven't seen his birth certificate yet. Bullsh\*t. He's not from the U.S. He's like a terrorist. Just what is he doing for this country so far?"
- Another man put it bluntly: "I just want to smoke a blunt and eat some watermelon with Obama, he's just another n\*gger."

But there have been far more constructive and thoughtful critiques of Obama's speech, particularly from progressive voices who seek justice in the Mideast. There is a vibrant Israeli peace movement out there, and a network of Jewish American peace organizations that are fighting for change. But they receive little attention in the press, particularly the U.S. media, and they must compete for airtime with the rightwing, pro-war hardliners.

[Brit Tzedek v'Shalom](#), the Chicago-based Jewish Alliance For Justice and Peace, has [an online pledge](#) to support Obama's two-state solution. According to the organization,

*No previous U.S. administration has been so forthright. President Obama has been firm in his endeavor to facilitate negotiation towards a two state solution. He hopes to leave the Bush Administration's legacy of empty words and no action behind.*

Debra DeLee, head of [Americans For Peace Now](#), said

*This bold speech demands bold action. The President is demonstrating determined, praiseworthy leadership on Mideast peacemaking. He is offering an historic opportunity for Israel and its neighbors. Israeli and Arab leaders must seize the moment. If they fail to do so, they will be responsible for blood shed in the future in the region. For Americans who support Israel, this is also an important moment in which to stand squarely with a President who is doing his utmost to bring peace to Israel.*

On the issue of putting a stop to settlements, [J Street](#), the political arm of the pro-Israel, pro-peace movement, responded with the following:

***Amen. A freeze means a freeze. This is exactly the sort of leadership we need from the President and Secretary of State if we are going to achieve a***

*two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - the only way to truly secure Israel's future as a Jewish, democratic homeland.*

*You can bet the Obama Administration is already hearing from hawkish voices on Israel - urging him to make exceptions, allow for more settlement growth, and to go slow. We've got to make sure the President knows pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans. support his strong line on settlements, for both Israel's and America's sake and security.*

Uri Avnery of the Israeli peace group [Gush Shalom](#) called the President's speech revolutionary and historic:

*This world needs a world law, a world order, a world democracy. That's why this speech really was historic: Obama outlined the basic contours of a world constitution.*

*WHILE OBAMA proclaims the 21st century, the government of Israel is returning to the 19th.*

*That was the century when a narrow, egocentric, aggressive nationalism took root in many countries. A century that sanctified the belligerent nation which oppresses minorities and subdues neighbors.*

[Tikkun magazine](#) characterized Obama's address as "an important step in a process of changing consciousness both in the Arab world, Israel and the U.S." adding that

*While expansion through natural growth is one of the issues, we recognize that even if Israel were to agree to no further settlements that the lives of Palestinians would not dramatically improve and their suffering would not be diminished by this alone. So there is legitimate concern if this becomes the only or major focus of the U.S. role in the conflict.*

[Electronic Intifada](#) provided some poignant commentary as usual, including co-founder Ali Abunimah, who fears that Obama may prove to be a "[Bush in sheep's clothing](#)," offering an elusive two-state solution that does not safeguard Palestinian rights:

*He lectured Palestinians that "resistance through violence and killing is wrong and does not succeed." He warned them that "It is a sign of neither courage nor power to shoot rockets at sleeping children, or to blow up old women on a bus. That is not how moral authority is claimed; that is how it is surrendered."*

*Fair enough, but did Obama really imagine that such words would impress an Arab public that watched in horror as Israel slaughtered 1,400 people in Gaza last winter, including hundreds of sleeping, fleeing or terrified children, with American-supplied weapons? ...Amnesty International recently confirmed what Palestinians long knew: Israel broke the negotiated ceasefire when it attacked Gaza last 4 November, prompting retaliatory rockets that killed no Israelis until after Israel launched its much bigger attack on Gaza. That he continues to remain silent about what happened in Gaza, and refuses to hold Israel accountable demonstrates anything but a commitment to full truth-telling.*

And Medea Benjamin, cofounder of [Global Exchange](#) and [CODEPINK: Women of Peace](#), echoed Abunimah's concern over the carnage in Gaza, [urging Obama to visit](#) the

Palestinian territory:

*But the issue that is really at the crux of the tensions with the United States is the intractable conflict between Israel and Palestine, and what many perceive as a one-sided US policy in support of Israel.*

*The Obama administration has taken a positive stand on the Israeli settlements, calling for a complete freeze. "[Obama] wants to see a stop to settlements -- not some settlements, not outposts, not 'natural growth' exceptions," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently told reporters.*

*But the administration has said almost nothing about the devastating Israeli invasion of Gaza that left more than 1,400 dead, including some 400 children. To many in the Middle East, this is an unfortunate continuation of past policies that condemn the loss of innocent Israeli lives, but refuse to speak out against the disproportionately greater loss of Palestinian lives at the hands of the Israeli military.*

In a [commentary two years ago](#), I discussed the importance of the Mideast peace movement— not tanks, helicopters or rifles from the U.S.—in helping to bring about change in that troubled holy land where love and even God often cannot be found. And such voices should be sought in playing an instrumental role in a new Palestine and a new Israel, one in which peace and human rights reign supreme.

Obama made the call, but will they follow? Hopefully they will, because there is no other choice.

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**The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog**

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