

# Book Review: Bending History? Barack Obama's Foreign Policy

by Blog Admin

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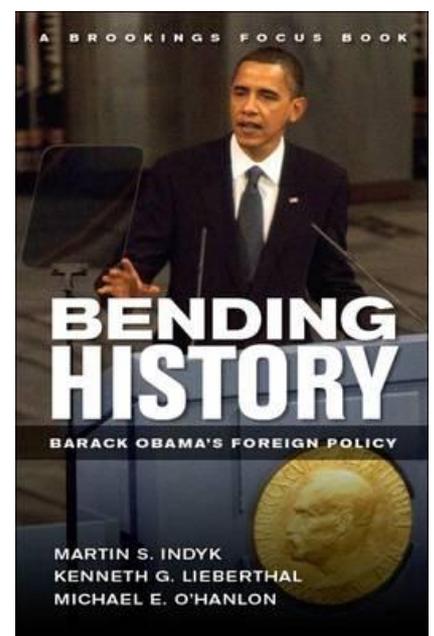
*How well has Barack Obama carried out his duties as U.S. commander-in-chief, top diplomat, and grand strategist? In **Bending History?** a trio of foreign policy experts illuminate the grand promise and the great contradictions of a president who has captured the attention and imagination of citizens around the world like few of his White House predecessors. **Robert Mason** recommends the book to readers seeking to further their understanding of the contemporary issues and challenges in which US Middle East policy is being formed.*



**Bending History? Barack Obama's Foreign Policy.** Martin S. Indyk, Kenneth G. Lieberthal and Michael E. O'Hanlon. Brookings FOCUS Books. February 2012.

## Find this book:

This book is timed to correspond with a critical juncture in US policy: the end of Obama's first period in office. The book covers wars in the Middle East, natural disasters in Haiti and Japan, revolutions in the Arab World and the economic and political rise of India and China. It charts the shifting international order, Obama's vision for the world and the large gap between his rhetoric and the political reality. The book's primary objective is to function as a scorecard for Obama's first term and then to serve as a summary of the foreign policy challenges he faces in the second term. Although the book offers a broad insight into US relations with China and the soft security issues, this review confines itself to those chapters which deal directly with the Middle East: Arab-Israeli peace-making, the Arab uprisings and the so-called 'rogue states'.



In chapter 4, Obama's vow to make Middle East peace a priority is scrutinised and contextualised in the post-Bush period when the US operated Abu Ghraib prison and Guantanamo Bay detention centre nearly bankrupted US policy in the Middle East. It rightly recognises that after five years of the second intifada there have been no direct Israeli – Palestinian negotiations and since George Mitchell, the US Middle East peace envoy, resigned in May 2011, the odds remain stacked against a breakthrough in the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP). Therefore, the chapter argues that the US has been left without any gains in Middle East peacemaking to convert into political capital that might be spent on improving the US position across the Arab World. The substance of the US reset policy towards the Middle East heralded by Obama's Cairo speech thus had to be put on hold until the second term. The contrast between the consistent 'hard power' relations which exists between the US and Israel, including Obama delivering on a \$30 billion military deal over ten years had until December 2012 stood in stark contrast to US 'soft power' towards its Arab allies. Only the imminent threat of a conflict with Iran has shifted US policy in this area.



The book goes on to assert that Obama could and should have learnt about the intractable difficulties of the Arab-Israeli conflict from Bill Clinton, but it took time to bring in Dennis Ross, the former Middle East peace envoy from the Clinton administration, to sit on the National Security Council. This created its own back-channel dynamic with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu which is said to have undermined the work of Hilary Clinton, the US Secretary of State, and George Mitchell. It appeared that every advantage for Obama making progress in the MEPP had its own disadvantage. The building of Israeli settlements in the

occupied territories, notably pressure from Shas (Sephardi Orthodox party) on the Israeli government for more settlements or more building in East Jerusalem; the Gaza Flotilla incident; and the continuing siege on Gaza all barred the way for a substantive political breakthrough. Attention is also drawn to Israel's security requirement in a final status agreement which has become a major barrier to Israel-Palestine negotiations. Netanyahu articulated that Israeli forces would have to stay in the Jordan valley for years to come, even though Ehud Olmert had previously accepted their withdrawal as part of his terms for a final agreement.

What the book doesn't state is that the Obama administration could have supported changes to facts on the ground beyond the settlement issue, even though this remains a fundamental issue. The Obama administration could have pushed the Quartet to do more to prepare for a final status agreement on Jerusalem and refugees, and plan for the success of a two-state solution. For example, my own research in this area shows that UNRWA has a \$100 million shortfall which it could use to reduce radicalisation amongst youth. More support could be given to the PNA to establish a multimodal transport infrastructure to ease exports, or to encourage Palestinian economic growth in areas of high potential, such as Jericho. Focusing on a single issue such as settlements has simply prolonged the negotiating process and increased the costs for both sides. US public diplomacy took a further knock when Obama vetoed Palestinian statehood at the UN, even though he spoke to promote the 1967 borders with changes to account for facts on the ground in May 2011. The US Presidential elections in 2012 put further pressure on maintaining the status quo.

The book goes on to cover the 'Arab Awakenings' in chapter 5, reading like a diary of the much covered political and economic shifts in the Middle East. Coming from former ambassadors and policy advisors, there is a conspicuous lack of US policy prescription. Covering the removal of America's stalwart friend, President Mubarak in Egypt, which signified a change of immense proportions in the Middle East's most populous Sunni state, there is no debate about how Islamist politics and policy will affect US interests. Instead, it concentrates on Obama's Libya policy which recognises the changing international balance of power and need for a multilateral approach post-Iraq. These themes of pivots and strategic alliances apparently dominate Obama's mindset, but Syria and North Korea have come to highlight the reality of trying to transform geo-politics in an era of diminishing international influence. Emphasising multilateralism may be the answer, but solving the conflicting values between the US and other powers in the UN Security Council remains problematic. The chapter points to the growing role of Turkey as a strategic ally, although it ignores the continuing role of Saudi Arabia and Qatar in supporting the Free Syrian Army against Bashar al-Assad. Indeed, Saudi Arabia is largely sidelined in the book as a traditional US ally in the Middle East.

Finally, chapter 6 discusses the role of 'rogue states' and the emergence of Iran as a regional threat after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, its resistance and countering policies against Israel and the US, and sectarian tensions having become more evident during the Arab uprisings. Although the chapter points to Iran's historic grievances with the US, these are not covered in a way which makes the complex bilateral dynamic comprehensible to a lay reader. Sanctions are assumed to be a pragmatic tool of foreign policy against Iran and yet it supports the unproven premise they will change Tehran's foreign policy orientation. Indeed, the chapter includes reference to Fereydoon Abbasi, the Head of Iran's Atomic Energy Agency, who stated in 2011 he was ready to step up production of uranium. What comes out of these sections and the other chapters on Middle East peace is the short-termism of US policymaking and the chronic lack of creativity, vision and engagement that are necessary to find sustainable diplomatic solutions amid the lobbies and constraints of domestic politics. The book should be of interest to anyone who already has a grounding in US foreign policy and who seek to further their understanding of the contemporary environment, issues and challenges in which US Middle East policy is being formed.

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**Dr Robert Mason** is an independent researcher and author of the forthcoming book: *Foreign Policy in Saudi Arabia and Iran: Economics and Diplomacy in the Middle East* to be published by I. B. Tauris. [Read more reviews by Robert.](#)