

# REMAKING US FOREIGN POLICY FOR A FRESH START WITH THE MUSLIM WORLD: LINGUISTIC AND DISCURSIVE FEATURES OF OBAMA'S CAIRO SPEECH<sup>1</sup>

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*ABSTRACT: Since his inaugural speech on 20 January 2009, Barack Obama has consistently kept the eloquence of his political speech that addresses the issue of change and the need to remake America by re-introducing it to itself and the world at large. In his Cairo Speech, delivered from the most populous Arab country, and in which he addresses a new beginning with the Arab and Muslim worlds, Obama continued to use the same linguistic choices to effect a change in the foreign policy of his Administration through dialogue. This work examines the discursive features of the Cairo Speech as a pragmatic text laced with the potential to make a "historic" change: bringing America back to itself and beautifying the image of „militant empire.“ Linguistic constructs related to 'change' and a 'new beginning' with the Muslim and Arab worlds are embedded in a new type of political language calling for a constructive dialogue with partners in an attempt to dust off the stains which the eight-year Bush Administration has brought to US foreign policy. This work looks at the transformative language of the Cairo speech by examining the political discourse therein for frequency, duration and intensity to see how subservient they are to change as a key-metaphor filtering through the speech in question.*

**KEYWORDS:** Obama, Cairo speech, political discourse, foreign policy; Muslim world, change, dialogue

## INTRODUCTION

If language is a game played by word-smiths for various purposes, the masters of the language game in the context of dynamic politics are usually the outspoken political leaders. It often goes without saying that in a popular democracy political leaders who are

nominated for senior office, be it legislative or executive, tend to use rhetorical and poetic expressions in their election campaigns to, practically, bring more voters to their sides rather than to, theoretically, increase supporters of their publicly advertised election programmes. Presumably, the category of the population targeted in this regard comprises not only the partisans who are already mobilised to support the nominee running for election but also the undecided, with fluctuating votes, a considerable number of whom need to see a desirable change affecting their well-being, quality of life and aspirations through a specific set of implementable policies. However, when those political leaders take office and start running the state machinery, poetic language is replaced by redundant prose expressions, mostly for justifications, as pressures mount and high expectations go low and gradually transpire into air bubbles. This experience among a number of outspoken political leaders and the elusive political language they are often bent on using, when policies are played out in real life situations, may as well apply to the dialogic language used by politicians whose conflicting agendas and hidden transcripts glove their declared wishes to settle problematic issues through dialogue, no matter if the negotiating stage set for that purpose is local, regional or international.

Although an urgent need on the way of resolving long-standing conflicts between rivals or adversary parties, dialogue in politics often raises the stakes, for what is expected to be delivered through dialogue should practically go beyond that dialogue. Thus the effectiveness of dialogue as a means to an end in the context of political disputes, differences and even enmity is often contested and challenged through an academic analysis of the political discourses shaping the unilateral visions of those political leaders engaged in a dialogue where beliefs and ideologies are too hard to compromise. Is this often the case when it comes to big, existential issues that need to inform and be informed by dialogue in politics? In a stalemate situation, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, could the now-suspended peace process endorsed by the UN and the Quartet be enhanced by a third party, like the US, assuming the role of a peace broker? Indications to the contrary may come from the language of the US addressing a visionary two-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and at the same time reaffirming an “unshakable bond” with Israel though not with Palestine. This paradox has been

widely noted and criticised by many scholars such as Wiarda (2006), Chomsky (2006), McCormick (2005) and Pipes and Garfinkle (1991). However, Obama's Administration, seems to be sending a different message through a different political language when compared to the former Administration of President George W. Bush. The language Obama has, so far, used to address significant issues in the Middle East and the wider Muslim World invites a study of the relationship between politics and dialogue, without ignoring the amount of politicisation and polarisation a dialogue may accommodate. This is the crust of the matter.

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The 'great expectations' for tangible change in US foreign policy concerning the Middle East conflict have been elicited from various speeches where Obama addresses that seemingly irreparable conflict in a way that sounds different from earlier White House political language. To that effect, Obama, after his inaugural 20 January 2009 speech, paid two state visits to the Middle East where he delivered two major speeches: in Ankara, Turkey (06 April 2009), and Cairo, Egypt (04 June 2009), respectively, to enhance dialogue with the Muslim and Arab worlds as a need for what he claimed partnership and cooperation on a variety of regional and global topics. The dialogic political language used by the President in this respect is a case in point in this article. More specifically, the article examines Obama's Cairo Speech for a foreshadowed change in his foreign policy aiming for a fresh start with the Arab and Muslim worlds, where the Palestinian cause, among other outstanding issues, comes to the fore as an indicator of that change.

In his Cairo Speech, Obama addresses a new beginning with the Muslim world. He uses a dialogic political strategy based on partnership, mutual interest and mutual respect for the sake of effecting a tangible transformation in his foreign policy. This article examines the linguistic and discursive features of the Cairo speech as a pragmatic text laced with the potential to straighten the drastic curve in US foreign policy by trying to bring America back on track and beautify its repulsive image as a militant empire.<sup>2</sup> This work looks at the transformative language of the Cairo speech by examining the political discourse carrying the prospects of change desired.

RATIONALE FOR STUDYING PRESIDENT  
OBAMA'S CAIRO SPEECH

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The main reason for studying Obama's Cairo Speech (04 June 2009) lies in the urge the speech has generated for research in the field of dialogue in politics, when critical discourse analysis is used to look at the new type of political language coming out from the White House to reshape US foreign policy. This assumption derives its gravity from a series of Obama's earlier speeches as Senator;<sup>3</sup> as candidate and nominee for presidency in 2008 and, more particularly, as the newly sworn-in President.<sup>4</sup> Besides, the Cairo speech was preceded by the Ankara speech in which Obama addressed a wide spectrum of well-developed topics, all of which focus on the changes to US foreign policy through the mirror reflecting Turko-American relations as an exemplary model. In one part of the Ankara speech, Obama addresses American-Muslim relations in a new, unfamiliar political language:

I know there have been difficulties these last few years. I know that the trust that binds us has been strained, and I know that strain is shared in many places where the Muslim faith is practiced. Let me say this as clearly as I can: the United States is not at war with Islam.<sup>5</sup>

In the same speech, Palestine, being at the heart of the Middle East conflict, fills a three-paragraph space of eloquent political language indicating a turning point in the US presidential discourse. The White House will be directly involved in the conflict as a peace broker whose goal is a lasting peace settlement between Israel and the Arab world.

In the Middle East, we share the goal of a lasting peace between Israel and its neighbours. Let me be clear: the United States strongly supports the goal of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security ... And that is the goal that I will actively pursue as President.<sup>6</sup>

A comparative study in political discourse between Obama's administration and Bush's reveals a marked difference in the stances taken by the two presidents and the linguistic choices used to shape US foreign policy. Bush used an aggressive political language to address international issues related to his global war on terror,

a visionary two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the war pains necessary for the birth of a new Middle East.<sup>7</sup> The same issues are also addressed by Obama but in a different political language; one which is less aggressive, less provocative and more reconciliatory and dialogic for the sake of easing the tension already built over eight years of the Bush administration.

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A few more controversial reasons that have also ignited the rationale for this study, but to a varied degree, cannot simply go unnoticed in the context of effecting a change in US foreign policy. They can be soon contested on the grounds that they are meant, in the first place, to promote the image of Obama as a man of peace and dialogue when compared to Bush. One of those reasons is the Nobel Prize for Peace awarded to Obama prior to any great achievement done in the interest of world peace.<sup>8</sup> The second reason is related to Obamas's desire to close the Guantanamo Bay Detention Centre.<sup>9</sup> The third reason is based on Obama's decision, as commander-in-chief, to put an end to the highly costly wars of invasion waged against both Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) respectively by withdrawing US forces; providing that part of the world a chance to take part in a dialogue for peace, and America and its allies in the coalition forces another chance to rethink the situation and embark on alternative strategies that promote and maintain peace.<sup>10</sup> It is for all these reasons that the present study of Obama's Cairo Speech is approached through critical discourse analysis for a fuller understanding of dialogue in politics as an optimal tool for settling conflicts.

#### AN OVERVIEW OF THE CAIRO SPEECH AS TEXT

The Cairo speech, as a written text, is transcribed from the televised version of the speech Obama delivered at the University of Cairo in Egypt on 04 June 2009. The speech was preceded by definitive indications that it was intended to ease the unresolved tension between the US and the Islamic world which had reached extreme levels during the Bush administration, and therefore Obama's Cairo speech is an attempt at redressing the situation.

As a wide-ranging address delivered with eloquence and skill, the speech was well received by the invited audience. It was also broadcast live by television channels and radio stations across the Middle

East and was quoted, reviewed and commented on worldwide. Although comments on the speech varied in terms of political analysis and academic research, there was a great deal of agreement that it was a ground-breaking speech in the way the Obama approached and envisioned a conflict-resolution strategy in a practical manner using both his linguistic skill and presidential powers.

It is the second major speech, after Ankara, addressing the Islamic world from outside of the US. In this speech, Obama attempts to ease the tension overwhelming relations between the US and the Arab/Muslim worlds by adjusting the focus of vision, which had previously been blurred. He re-introduces America to these two worlds whose inhabitants, for the most part, still voice anti-American sentiments due to the two wars launched against Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), the tragic consequences of the occupation thereof, and the position the US adopted in favour of Israel as an occupier of Palestinian and other Arab territories. In the context of defusing that tension, Obama addresses nine major issues, all of which are articulated with much care and oratory skill. These issues are: violence and extremism, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Iran's nuclear programme, democracy and governance, religious freedoms, women's rights, and economic development. Although the nine issues are inter-related, when it comes to addressing regional and international issues that need to be redressed, this article focuses on the implications of the speech, particularly the metaphor of change that is meant to reshape US foreign policy and accordingly usher in a new beginning with the Muslim world.

I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition (para. 5).

Such eloquent political language permeating the seventy five paragraphs making the structure of the speech is not simply an ice-breaking exercise in public speaking. Obama is trying to breakthrough, a precedent in US foreign policy based on a dialogue he initiates with the equal other to settle uneasy disputes that go back to ages of mutual unrecognised and unaccepted differences.<sup>11</sup> To what extent has Obama made his political message clear to his audience,

to those listeners interested in conflict-resolution mechanism, and more particularly to the peoples of the region where the conflict was created and constantly nourished through hatred?<sup>12</sup> Critical discourse analysis can be a useful approach to study the speech and answer this question.

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#### CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AS AN APPROACH TO THE TEXT

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) takes the text as a primary unit of analysis and goes on from there to what is beyond the text. A text, be it written or spoken, is often taken to be acted upon as its form and structure cannot be arbitrary. As such, it remains bound to a set of particular conventionalised discourses. In this regard, Obama's Cairo speech, as text, features discourses of political leadership, power differentials, conflicting ideologies, domestic, regional and international challenges – the last includes broad foreign policies and strategies. As a conventional form, then, it constrains and enables meanings on many levels between the speaker as encoder and the receiver as decoder. Linguistically speaking, discourse can be seen as a cultural tradition that comprises the linguistic self-consciousness as well as the skills and methodologies brought into play to shape the convictions of a particular audience and sustain a positive image of the public speaker. However, discourse is often slippery, fluid, elusive and hard to define.<sup>13</sup> CDA, on the other hand, takes a different path to send a different message.<sup>14</sup> It is a tool that helps a discourse analyst to illustrate how unmasking the written/spoken word can bring about a different perspective and a deeper understanding of whose interest is being served by paying attention to what, as van Dijk (1999) argues, politicians say and do. It illuminates ways in which powerful and influential political leaders construct versions of reality in favour of their own political vision and interest. Thus CDA compels us to make a move from seeing words in the abstract to seeing them as loaded with meanings in a particular context.

The analyst, using CDA to approach a public speech as a formal text, attempts to debunk the words of the public speaker, in this article the political leader, to come up with further meanings embedded in or excluded from the text.<sup>15</sup> A study of various lexical and

grammatical devices used in the text is an essential part of CDA, for 'texts are meaningful only because they actualise the meaning potential of the linguistic system.'<sup>16</sup> As a tool for exploring hidden meanings beneath and beyond the surface level of text, CDA seeks to link the micro level of the text itself with the macro level representing the power structures in society and even those in the international community. Provided with that framework of reference, the CDA analyst may not claim to essentially possess the exclusive interpretation of text.

Obama's Cairo speech, as political discourse, is effective in both register and tone, and evidenced by its ability to organise and regulate relations of power. A discourse as such might be classified as a 'regime of truth.'<sup>17</sup> It is this type of regime taking hold of a political system that allows for a revealing job done by CDA analysts to study what is included in and what is excluded from the speech under study.

In this formal public speech, Obama is sending an overt message to the Muslim and Arab worlds: US foreign policy is undergoing drastic change, from imperial, uni-polar hegemony to multi-lateral cooperation and partnership based on common interests and mutual respect. The message, spreading over seventy five chunks of written text, is consistently endorsed by specific key-topics at both the paragraph and the sentence levels. By choosing this mode of language skill for the purpose of persuading his willing-to-believe audience, Obama succeeds in creating a perspective or a slant to impress that audience of the new vision guiding the foreign policy of his administration intended to redress the long-standing problem undermining US-Muslim relations. Immediately after the salutary opening paragraph, replete with goodwill, Obama admits that there is a problem and proceeds to identify and resolve it.

1. We meet at a time of tension between the United States and Muslims around the world – tension rooted in historical forces that go beyond any current policy debate (para. 2).
2. Violent extremists have exploited these tensions in a small but potent minority of Muslims (para. 3).
3. I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and the Muslims around the world (para. 5).

Thus from the outset of the speech, Obama sets a problem-solution model which is consistently reinforced by the sequence of



the textual segments making the entirety of the text. The sequence (situation-problem-solution), which is presumed to be culturally ingrained, is governed by words signposting the text. This is skillfully done through a deliberate choice of diplomatic, yet pragmatic, linguistic structures that draw attention to the peace-carrying message, as conflict-resolution strategy, Obama is trying to convey to the Muslim world in an uneasy atmosphere of doubt engulfing the state of mind on the receiving end. Subtly built into a logical sequence to dismiss the audience's doubt, the friendly words and expressions used to convey that message boil down to confidence-building strategy through highlighting the concept of reciprocity.<sup>18</sup>

4. That is what I will try to do – to speak the truth as best I can, humbled by the task before us, and firm in my belief that the interests we share as human beings are far more powerful than the forces that drive us apart (para. 6).
5. Part of this conviction is rooted in my own experience. I am a Christian, but my father came from a Kenyan family that includes generations of Muslims (para. 7).
6. As a student of history, I also know civilisation's debt to Islam. It was Islam, at places like al-Azhar University, that carried the light of learning through so many centuries, paving the way for Europe's Renaissance and Enlightenment (para. 8).
7. That experience guides my conviction that partnership between America and Islam must be based on what Islam is, not what it isn't. And I consider it part of my responsibility as president of the United States to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam wherever they appear (para. 10).
8. But that same principle must apply to Muslim perceptions of America. Just as Muslims do not fit a crude stereotype, America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire (para. 11).

By choosing the degree of formality in accordance with the normal conventions of the Western mode of persuasive writing, as revealed in the first eighteen paragraphs of his speech, Obama seems to have successfully laid down a solid get-set, or what Harre and van Langenhove (1999) call a prepositioning stage,<sup>19</sup> from where to proceed addressing the nine major issues plaguing relations between the US and the Muslim world. In terms of positioning analysis

theory, prepositioning is an essential part of discourse. That is, the speaker does not simply assign himself a position; he gives reasons to justify taking one.<sup>20</sup> In the positioning stage that follows, Obama brings personal experience, knowledge of the history of Islam and power of the presidency to substantiate his conviction about change of policy and the prospects of peace based on dialogue, cooperation and partnership with the Muslim world. In other words, positioning theory allows for a comprehensive understanding of how the parties implicated in discourse ascribe to themselves and to others certain rights and duties as they reflect on issues such as war, peace, identity, and so forth. Obama's political discourse is miles ahead of Bush's, despite the similar rhetorical expressions they use as public speakers. The difference between the two presidential discourses, according to CDA, resides in the semantic of conflict which Bush employed in abundance to assert hegemony while Obama eschews to build mutual confidence and trust.

#### LINGUISTIC AND DISCURSIVE STRUCTURES OF THE SPEECH

In his Cairo speech, Obama's political discourse capitalises on the metaphor of change as a conceptual structure for a political ideology. This metaphor arises in the very process of linguistic choices during the construction of text and talk. The linguistic choices, both grammatical and lexical, seem to sustain Obama's intention to convey a feeling that he is serious about meeting the challenge of that change. This intention is embedded in the following key words and expressions, to mention only a few: 'This cycle of suspicion and discord must end,' 'America is not and never will be at war with Islam,' 'I have come here to seek a new beginning,' 'America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition,' 'It's my responsibility to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam wherever they appear,' 'Words alone cannot meet the needs of our people,' 'we must not be prisoners of the past,' and 'We must face these tensions squarely.'

The modal auxiliary "must," which Obama uses 24 times in the speech, addresses the need on the part of all parties involved in the problem to translate that moral obligation into action. This re-echoes the meaning of sharing, partnership, and reciprocity which the speaker uses 13 times to instil a new atmosphere of confidence and

turn the page of discord and with it the impact of former foreign policy. This is also reinforced by the use of another modal auxiliary “will” (12 times) to show the speaker’s determination to take action in favour of change. However, that determination to act is not based on a golden rule or a magical formula. In other words, Obama’s intention to effect a tangible change in his foreign policy needs time to materialise.

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9. I do recognise that change cannot happen overnight. No single speech can eradicate years of mistrust, nor can I answer in the time that I have all the complex questions that brought us to this point. But I am convinced that in order to move forward, we must say openly the things we hold in our hearts, and that too often are said only behind closed doors. There must be a sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground (para. 6).

These linguistic and discursive structures imply a realistic approach to the problem he inherited from previous administrations. Thus, alternating between the first singular pronoun “I” and the first plural pronoun “We” is a call for dialogue in politics with the equal other to secure a „common ground“ from where a joint effort, of partners to solve the problem and maintain mutual interest is likely to yield a sustainable outcome. These linguistic structures are frequently deployed throughout the text to convey an air of certainty that the change targeted is a serious issue. Thanks to the discourse relations of cohesion and coherence (expressed, for instance, through variation in conjunctive markers), the constituent parts of the text hang together in unity. Although linguistic features are not the most salient characteristics of political discourse, no text could ever have a material existence without them.<sup>21</sup>

The discursive practices used to tidy up Obama’s address to the Muslim world renders the text dynamic. Admitting that there is a problem, seeking to redress that problem through partnership, and determining to act in that direction without faltering, Obama scores an advance over Bush which acted single-handedly. Even the frequent use of the first person singular “I” (41 times) is a clear gesture that Obama, being the head of the executive power and the commander-in-chief, is empowered by the American Constitution to take action in line with his conviction that seems to guide his

new foreign policy. Made clear throughout the text, that conviction is based on his personal experience as the son of a Christian mother and a Muslim father, his scholarly background as a student of history, and his political involvement as a former senator and law-maker in the US Congress. The power relations, underlying the overuse of "I," seem to cloth the tone of concession on the part of the President in favour of a sustainable effort with the Muslim world to combat a common enemy, violent extremists.

10. And throughout history, Islam has demonstrated through words and deeds the possibilities of religious tolerance and racial equality (para. 8).
11. I have known Islam on three continents before coming to the region where it was revealed (para. 10).
12. In Ankara, I made clear that America is not – and never will be – at war with Islam (para. 19).

Keeping an unswerving register throughout the text, Obama draws his audience's attention to the degree of certainty about his position as a willing peacemaker who comes to the region to readjust the crude image conceived of the US as an empire by re-introducing America to the Muslim and Arab worlds as a friendly partner for a fresh start. Reiterated expressions that beg certainty and reaffirmation of the unfaltering position of Obama in that US foreign policy is undergoing change are loud enough through frequency (10 times). For instance,

13. So let there be no doubt: Islam is a part of America (para. 14).
14. Of course, recognising our common humanity is only the beginning of our task (para. 15).
15. Make no mistake: we do not want to keep our troops in Afghanistan (para. 21).
16. I have made it clear to the Iraqi people that we pursue no bases and no claim on their territory or resources. Iraq's sovereignty is its own. That is why I ordered the removal of our combat brigades by next August (para. 25).
17. So let me be clear: no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other (para. 46).
18. But this much is clear: governments that protect these [democratic] rights are ultimately more stable, successful and secure (para. 48).

19. Now let me be clear: issues of women's equality are by no means simply an issue for Islam (para. 58).

Nonetheless, the President's political discourse concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which is viewed in both the Muslim and the Arab worlds as among the most demanding issue in need of a suitable political solution based on all relevant UN Security Council resolutions, invites a focused critical reading when it comes to critical discourse analysis. In this regard, Obama adopts Bush's (and previous administration's) vision of a two-state solution: Palestine and Israel living side by side in peace. If Obama introduces himself as a peace broker between the Arab Palestinians and the Israelis, his endorsement of Bush's solution cannot be seen as a major breakthrough. It took Bush eight years of trying to translate his vision into a reality but to no avail. It might take Obama the whole period of his term in office to broker a lasting peace settlement in the Middle East to actualise that vision and put an end to the occupation and humiliation the Palestinian people. Earlier peace initiatives and agreements between the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the state of Israel have ended in failure<sup>22</sup> despite the direct sponsorship of the US and the support of Europe and the international community.

Critical discourse analysis is used here to illuminate and eventually unmask the versions of reality Israel and the US construct in the service of their mutual interests, irrespective of who takes office in the White House. For Israel and the US, it is an existential matter related to Israel's legitimacy as a state for those Jewish settlers who survived the Holocaust in Europe and were enabled to navigate from Europe in successive massive convoys of immigrants to Palestine which was then under the British Mandate. What is ironic is that Europe, which persecuted its Jews,<sup>23</sup> colluded with them to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine through violence and declare their independent state one day after the end of the British Mandate on 14 May 1948. That event caused the expulsion of much of the Palestinian civilians from their land and property. The creation of the state of Israel on 78% of historical Palestine has also created *al-Nakba*<sup>24</sup> which transformed the homeless Palestinians into refugees living in make-shift tents for temporary shelters in the remaining parts of Palestine and the neighbouring Arab countries.

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Obama, trying to play the role of a fair peace broker, justifies the two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in a highly compassionate language. He is sending a sensational message describing the two peoples as equally victimised and persecuted, and therefore they deserve self-rule and autonomy as neighbours, each in their own state. However, he is also sending a covert message to the influential Jewish Lobby and its powerful association, AIPAC,<sup>25</sup> in the US.

20. America's strong bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable. It is based upon cultural and historical ties, and the recognition that the aspirations for a Jewish homeland is rooted in a tragic history that cannot be denied (para. 29).

21. Around the world, the Jewish people were persecuted for centuries, and anti-Semitism in Europe culminated in an unprecedented Holocaust (para. 30).

Using a historical narrative to describe the European anti-Semitic sentiments and the Jewish Holocaust, Obama is in no position to justify the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine where Jews, Christians and Muslims lived for centuries in relative peace. There has been no historical narrative telling that the Jews were ever persecuted in Palestine, the Arab world or the Muslim world. Why should the mistakes of Europe be visited upon the Arab Palestinians? Why should the Palestinians pay for a crime they did not commit? Obama fails to tell the other side of the historical narrative. In other words, his view of the "fullness of history"<sup>26</sup> is deemed either incomplete or partial, if not cynical. The same tragedy would have happened to the peoples of Uganda or Argentina if the Zionist leaders had accepted the British offer: designating one of those countries as a Jewish homeland.<sup>27</sup> Against objective historical reality, Obama, who studied history and law, sounds self-defeating or biased, and this rules out his role as a peace maker.

When it comes to the Middle East in general and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular, Obama sounds more like a biased peace broker. His words and deeds reflect this truth about US foreign policy, not only in his Cairo speech but also in earlier and later speeches. In a recent speech to the AIPAC Policy Conference held in Washington, DC (20 May 2011), Obama's rhetoric about a peaceful settlement cannot stand challenge. He might have sought to please

both parties over the issue of peace, but his words and deeds say it so flatly that he is a friend of and ally to Israel for personal and political reasons. This position, voiced before AIPAC members, would take him much farther while preparing for re-election<sup>28</sup> in 2012.

22. The commitment of the United States to the security of Israel is ironclad (para.6).

His cynical attitude rings morbidly as he distorts the science of archaeology.<sup>29</sup>

23. When I touched my hand against the Western Wall and placed my prayer between its ancient stones, I thought of all the centuries that the children of Israel had longed to return to their ancient homeland (para. 9).

24. So make no mistake, we will maintain Israel's qualitative military edge (para. 11).

25. Israel's legitimacy is not a matter for debate. That is my commitment. That is my pledge to all of you (para. 23).

On the other hand, Obama mentions the Palestinians nineteen times, in five of which he sounds rather humane as he pities their suffering under direct Israeli military occupation and their dire life in overcrowded, unhealthy refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and the neighbouring Arab countries. However, as he equates between victim and victimizer, he calls for a mutual recognition of their rights to live side by side in peace and security in two independent states. It is ironic on the part of Obama when he guarantees the right of Israel to exist and defend its borders, which, to date, are not final for the UN. While providing Israel with sophisticated weapons for self-defence, he requests seeing a non-militarised Palestinian state, thus denying the Palestinians their right to self defence as any other nation. A change in US foreign policy in the interest of peace remains no more than lip service and some honeyed material for local and regional consumption.

26. On the other hand, it is also undeniable that the Palestinian people – Muslims and Christians – have suffered in pursuit of a homeland. For more than 60 years they have endured the pain of dislocation. Many wait in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza and neighbouring lands for a life of peace and security that they have never been able to lead. They endure the daily humiliations – large and small – that come with occupation. So let there be no doubt: the situation for

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the Palestinian people is intolerable. America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspirations for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own (para. 31).

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The above-quoted material taken from the speech is a true description of the Palestinian situation under occupation and in exile. Obama recognises the legitimate aspirations and historical rights of the Palestinian people to have a state of their own and in their own homeland.<sup>30</sup> However, the language used to communicate his vision seems to be that of a faithful preacher, not a President whose power and authority are incomparable to any of his counterparts in the world. It sounds pitiful, compassionate and humane as if the Palestinians had been dislocated [and also dispossessed] for no reason and by an unbeknownst force. Obama's rhetoric is rather ameliorative in approaching this tragic situation. In fact, the metaphor 'in pursuit of a homeland'<sup>31</sup> is borrowed from Hebrew literature<sup>32</sup> that does not seem to apply to Palestine and the Palestinians. What the Palestinian Refugees need the international community, including the US, to do for them is only one thing: recognise their right to return to their homeland, not search for a homeland. Obama cannot be ignorant of this fact, irrespective of the new political language he uses to redress the situation. He only refers once to the Israeli occupation, but calls for a sustained dialogue between the occupier and the occupied where power relations between the two sides serve the occupation and nullify UNSC resolutions.

27. Palestinians must abandon violence. Resistance through violence and killing is wrong and does not succeed (para. 34).

Obama sounds contradictory or confused when Israeli occupation is opposed in terms of international law or Palestinian resistance. If resistance means violence, is it not ironic when he refers to a period of history when the US was occupied by Great Britain whose troops were forced out of the country because of the American people's resistance and use of violence which had led to the Declaration of Independence on 04 July 1776?

28. We were born out of revolution against an empire (para. 11).

In terms of diplomacy, Obama does not sound any more persuasive. He will (and did) oppose the Palestinian Authority filing an official request for Palestine to become a member state of UN in September 2011. The President's position in this regard, although different in style and substance from that of the former



administration, does not respond objectively to the need for a historic peaceful settlement between Israel and Palestine. Both the legitimacy and security of Israel as a state remain a constant priority factor in the political discourse of the American establishment, whether Republican or Democratic. Accordingly, the changing scene in the current US foreign policy is selective and self-interested.

Furthermore, the metaphor of change targeting the remaining issues raised in the speech does not seem less obscure when it comes to action. Indeed, Obama keeps distancing himself from being implicated in sensitive issues inherited from the Bush administration. For instance, the Iraqi war (2003-present) is, for him, a war of choice which he, as senator, rejected. Does this mean that he is trying to shirk responsibility? As rule is continuity in democratic polity, irrespective of whoever takes the Oval Office, Obama seems to have accepted responsibility when he sent 30,000 more combat troops to Iraq in 2009. If he is pulling troops out by the end of 2011, it is because Congress has endorsed his plan to cut the budget of the armed forces by \$3.4 trillion (USD)<sup>33</sup> to meet the deficit resulting from federal debts. This is a change of necessity, not choice. Even “terrorism,” which is globally condemned, is replaced with “violence and extremism.” Obama is trying not to associate Islam with violence or Muslims with extremists. The quote he takes from the Holy Koran against homicide points a finger at al-Qaida’s non-Muslim behaviour on 9/11. The pragmatic language he uses ‘delivers the linguistic means by which rational agents do things with words.’<sup>34</sup>

Concerning other issues such as women’s rights, democracy, religious freedom and economic developments, Obama sounds cautious. Although he praises shared human values, such as justice, tolerance and the rule of law, he is against imposing democracy as a political system on any country. He distances himself from Bush whose foreign policy was branded with a process of democratising the Middle East by preparing Iraq to play a role-model to that effect. Ironically, Afghanistan and Iraq now stand as two ‘democratically elected’ governments operating under US occupation. The two regimes are well known for their unspeakable corruption, sectarian and tribal divisions and merciless civil strife, evils unknown to Afghanis and Iraqis even under Taliban and Hussein. In line with this, Obama does not criticise autocratic governments with which

America has various common interests. To present his image as a non-interventionist in other countries' political systems is part of the game of nations, which he plays skilfully. Hegemony can also be maintained without direct intervention or coercion.

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As for Muslim women's rights, Obama maintains the same level of caution. His reductionist view of Muslim women wearing *hejab* or head-scarf is not the whole story. He promises to empower woman and sustain gender equality by offering to develop partnership programmes with any willing 'Muslim-majority country.' Did the US do so in Turkey, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as Muslim countries? Obama would have been better set to mark real change had he pressured Israel to free those Palestinian women and children imprisoned for being viewed by the Israeli military as suspects, that is mothers, sisters or daughters of resistance fighters.

#### SPECIFIC ISSUES EXCLUDED FROM THE TEXT

Whether done consciously or unconsciously, excluded facts from the text downgrade much of the credibility of Obama as he addresses the Muslim and Arab worlds from Cairo. It is true that Obama's political discourse appears so different from that of Bush, but it is also true that he, as a political leader, uses culturally-ingrained rhetorical expressions and linguistic structures to sound persuasive, especially when the issues raised in the speech/text are serious and crucial to the global role of America at this moment in time. In political discourse analysis, especially in Anglo-American cultural context, politicians are expected to be both persuasive and informative. However, critical discourse analysis 'may not only account for this dual function but also for interfacing micro and macro phenomena, such as ideology, political organisation, lobby pressures and other relevant micro aspects involved in the production and interpretation of political discourse.'<sup>35</sup> What makes a text open to various interpretations is the assumption that 'ideologies reside in texts,' and that 'it is not possible to read off ideologies from texts.'<sup>36</sup> In the speech under study, there is frequent reference to the constitutional legacy laid down by 'our Founding Fathers,' namely Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. Obama recalls them for their achievements in building a great nation and advancing 'the American Dream' for equal opportunities to all citizens. Their great

but 'unfinished' job must be completed by the ancestors, he being one of them.<sup>37</sup>

However, Obama, who says he has studied history, chooses to read from one source when he recollects some historical events as causes of the state of tension engulfing the relations between the US and the Muslim world. Recalling the 'Crusade Wars' (1096-1291) as a series of 'religious wars' between the West and the Muslim world, he wants his audience to forget all about that period, for 'if we choose to be bound by the past, we will never move forward.' But an objective reading of history indicates that the Crusade armies, although incited by the Church, were practically led by European monarchs and princes whose political ambitions over generations were worth the eight successive military campaigns waged against the Arab and Muslim worlds. The Crusades were religious wars in disguise.<sup>38</sup>

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Obama refers to 'violent extremists as a small but potent minority of Muslims who have exploited these tensions' and caused damage to the relations between Muslims and the US. 'This had led some in my country to view Islam as inevitably hostile not only to America and western countries but also to human rights.' If he means to exclude this group, namely *al-Qaida*, from the rest of the Muslims, Obama is dealing with effects, not causes. Excluded from the text is the cause why those violent extremists assumed that adversary position against the US. The same group, now labelled and libelled extremists by Obama, used to fight the Soviet troops that invaded Afghanistan (1979-1989) with direct military support and aid from US administrations. There must be a story behind the birth of those violent extremists. As it is excluded from the text, it does harm to Obama's credibility as a man who claims he has studied history and law.

Another exclusion from the text, which is also a factor of tension, is the way Obama views the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Israel was created by systematic collusion between Zionism and the West, on the soil of Palestine in 1948. This state was recognised by the UN General Assembly as a new member in 1949, on condition that the government of Israel cooperate with the UN to facilitate the return of all the Palestinian refugees who were forced to flee their property and homeland. Obama jumps over the central cause of the conflict and focuses on the impact of the Israeli 1967 occupation

on the Palestinian civil life in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. For him, 'Israel's legitimacy as a state is not debatable,' and that 'Palestinians must stop violence [against Israel].' That is why he (mis-) takes resistance for violence and calls on both sides to negotiate a peace treaty, where power relations serve the occupation and not the occupied. Where is the norm in brokering the issue of peace? Obama, however, laments the miserable situation of the Palestinians under Israeli occupation; deplores the Israeli siege laid to Gaza and the continuous construction of settlements in occupied Palestinian territories; and bewails the humiliation caused by the Israeli military checkpoints to the Palestinian civilians on daily basis. Yet, what is excluded is quite unspeakable. Obama seems to have silenced his sentiments about Palestinian land expropriation, demolition of their house structures, destruction of their mountain-old oil groves, renaming of Arab places and shrines in to Hebrew, detention centres, closures, curfews, military checkpoints, the construction of the snake-like Separation Wall on Palestinian soil and around Jerusalem, and the annexation of occupied East Jerusalem to the state of Israel – to mention a few. All these acts of occupation are violations of Geneva Conventions (1949). Obama's cynicism, however, multiplies when he called for the release of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier captured in a battle with Hamas militants in 2006, but he never mentioned the 9,807 Palestinian detainees<sup>39</sup> most of whom were taken hostage from their bedrooms at the break of dawn. This also reduces the credibility of Obama as a peace broker.

One more basic issue absent from the speech/text is religious intolerance. Obama seems to refer rather easily to specific citations he quotes from the three holy books: *the Talmud*, *the Bible* and *al-Koran*. These quotations are meant to promote the message of tolerance and peace which is quite suitable to the context of situation and the linguistic choices used in the text. However, the constant reference to the three *Abrahamic* religions in the context of peace and tolerance remains a contested issue when viewed against what is going on in real life situations. Obama refers to the bloody reprisals traded between Muslim *Sunni* and *Shia* factions in Iraq, but he does not even hint to the fact that these sectarian intimidations were non-existent, as violent acts, before the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Other incidents taking place in America and Europe, against Muslim symbols, were simply dismissed or justified by Western

government officials as part of the freedom of expression.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, what goes on in the Palestinian occupied territories, and more especially in East Jerusalem every Friday, is a telling story about religious intolerance and discrimination exercised bluntly by the Israeli security forces on Muslims performing their prayers at the *al-Aqsa* Mosque. The Israelis decide which believers heading for Jerusalem is eligible to perform Friday prayers and who is not.<sup>41</sup> Skipping public scenes of intolerance is a loophole in the objectivity of Obama, and this also reduces his credibility when it comes to effecting change in his foreign policy. Good intention, wishful thinking and words alone are not conducive to peace if not coupled with the will to act.<sup>42</sup> Building bridges and narrowing gaps between the US and the Muslim and Arab worlds need less rhetoric and more action.

A final point, also excluded from the text, is Obama's untaken-yet decision either to waive or reform those American laws which disproportionately ban Arab and Muslim financial contributions to humanitarian charity funds. Obama speaks proudly of American Muslims performing their religious freedom, rituals and duties across the US. However, his words cannot be significant enough unless they are translated into action. Giving American Muslims 'hearts and minds' is one thing, but treating them as equal citizens, without being required to take extra steps to prove their loyalty or belonging to the country, is quite another. This selectivity which shapes a significant portion of Obama's political discourse in the text is yet again another obstacle in the way of changing his foreign policy. The following example from Turkey clarifies the President's firm but uneasy position concerning the issue of change in question. Obama responded metaphorically to a student's question, in Istanbul, concerning the pace of political change in the US as follows: 'States are like big tankers. They are not like speedboats. You cannot whip them around and go in another direction. You turn them slowly, and eventually you end up in a very different place' (April 9, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

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This article has attempted to look at the issue of change Obama's Cairo speech brought to US foreign policy. More specifically, the article examined Obama's political discourse seeking a way out from the state of tension impacting the relations between the US and the Arab and Muslim worlds. The political language the president uses in this speech to that effect is something new when compared to Bush. That is why the speech was well received by the audience attending the Cairo event as well as by so many interested observers elsewhere. However, the speech was also met with a shrug by some politicians and scholars in the US and Israel. For instance, Eidelberg, using an *ad hominem* fallacy, comments on the speech by trading a blow against the person of Obama. In his article "My Response to Obama's Cairo Speech" (2009), he describes the President as 'a master of deception who cannot distinguish truth from falsehood'.<sup>43</sup>

Nonetheless, the use of critical discourse analysis to guide my interpretation of the speech has been useful. Obama's oratory skill to make a fresh start with the Arab and Muslim worlds does not seem to have overlooked the pressures exerted on his administration by various lobbyists in the US and elsewhere. The metaphor of the 'heavy tankers' he used in response to the Turkish student's question about political change may summarise his presidential position as he tries to strike a compromise between the global interests of the US and the power differentials on the domestic level. The use of critical discourse analysis, as a linguistic and discursive approach to his speeches before and after his Cairo speech, tells much about the President's difficult position to bring about a desirable change that improves the global image of America without reducing its dominance and hegemony as a superpower.

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- 1 Most of the ideas included in this article stem from a paper I delivered at the Wurzburg International Symposium on Dialogue in Politics, organised by the International Association of Dialogue Analysis (IADA) and hosted by the Wurzburg University, Germany, 13-15 September, 2010.
- 2 Labelling the US a 'militant empire' goes back to President Roland Reagan who invaded Grenada in 1983, laid siege to Nicaragua to change its socialist political system, bombed the Libyan capital Tripoli, and sent troops outside the United States to combat international terrorism. The massive arms race policy Reagan endorsed led to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, and the ushering in of a New World Order on the eve of the fall of the USSR and the supremacy of the US as global hegemony.
- 3 See Obama's address to the Democratic National Convention, Boston, 27 July 2004.
- 4 See Obama's inaugural speech on January 20, 2009
- 5 Barack Obama (2009), "Address to the Turkish Assembly," para. 38, available at <<http://hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/11376661.asp>> (accessed 10 June 2010).
- 6 Ibid. para. 29.
- 7 See President G. W. Bush's infamous 'You are either with us or against us' while addressing the international community from the US Congress, in the wake of 9/11 attacks on World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon. The same language was also used by (then) Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, in her remarks about the Israeli July 2006 war on Lebanon, when she said, 'We are now witnessing the birth of the new Middle East.'
- 8 On 09 October 2009, the Norwegian Nobel Prize Committee decided to award the Nobel Peace Prize for 2009 to President Barack Obama 'for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples,' attaching special importance to his vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons. In his Acceptance of the Prize address in Oslo, Norway, on 11 December Obama humbly passed the following remark: 'And yet I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the considerable controversy that your generous decision has generated. In part, this is because I am at the beginning, not the end, of my labours on the world stage. Compared to some of the giants of history who have received this prize ... my accomplishments are slight.'
- 9 Since he took office and residence in the White House, 20 January 2009, the decision to close Guantanamo Bay Prison in response to Geneva Conventions has not been put in to effect.

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- 10 Although describing the US war in Afghanistan (2001) as a war of choice, and that on Iraq (2003) as a war of necessity, Obama has not been so decisive to pull out all troops from the two countries.
- 11 In plain and self-explanatory language, Obama attributes those differences to the Crusades spanning two centuries (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>) of wars and bloodshed between European armies claiming Jerusalem back by war and the Muslim world recovering the holy city by war, too.
- 12 Reference is made to the Hebrew term *Hasamba* (Hate Literature) in form of popular detective stories addressed to school children. See also Tamar Meroz (1975), *Israel's Hate Literature for Children*, trans. from Hebrew by Israel Shahak as *The Non-Jew in the Jewish State: A Collection of Documents*, *Ha'aretz* Weekly Supplement, pp. 8-27.
- 13 Frances Henry and Carol Tator (2002), *Discourse of Domination*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- 14 Ruth Wodak and Paul Chilton (eds.) (2005), *A New Agenda in (Critical) Discourse Analysis: Theory, Methodology and Interdisciplinarity*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- 15 See McGregor, 2003.
- 16 Michael A. K. Halliday (2004), *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., London: Arnold, p. 658.
- 17 Michel Foucault (2000), "The Birth of Social Medicine," in Michel Foucault, *Essential Works III: Power*, New York: The New Press, pp. 134-156.
- 18 Obama's concept of reciprocity is contrasted with Bush's concept of polarisation and hegemony after 9/11, where expressions like 'We vs. They' and 'You are either with us or against us' distinguishes their political discourses.
- 19 Rom Harre and Luk van Langenhove (1999), *Positioning Theory: Moral Contexts of International Action*. Malden: Blackwell.
- 20 Fathali M. Moghaddam, R. Harre and N. Lee (eds.) (2008), *Global Conflict Resolution through Positioning Theory*, New York: Springer, p. 11.
- 21 Halliday, p. 132.
- 22 Specific reference is made to *Oslo Accords* co-signed by Israel and the PLO in 1992, putting a gradual end to the Israeli military rule of the Arab Palestinian territories occupied in the June war (1967), enabling the PLO to establish its interim Palestinian Authority there for a definite transitional period.
- 23 Reference is made not only to the Holocaust but also to the Russian Pogroms.
- 24 An Anglicized Arabic word for mass catastrophe perpetrated by the Jewish militant against unarmed Palestinian civilians, causing mass expulsion from their land and property in 1948. See also Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2006. The



Arab-Jewish war of that year resulted in securing only 22% of historical Palestine, and that remaining part was later to be known as Occupied Palestinian Territories comprising the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip.

- 25 AIPAC stands for American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a powerful lobbying group whose members also include congressmen from both parties. It advocates pro-Israel policies to Congress and the Executive Branch of the United States. Obama addressed an AIPAC convention in Washington, DC, 20 May 2011, that he would reject the Palestinian attempt to gain UN Security Council recognition of Palestine as an independent state in the International Community.
- 26 Walter Benjamin (1969), *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York: Schocken Books.
- 27 In his Memoirs, written in German, Theodor Herzl, Founder of Zionism in Europe, wrote that he was considering accepting the British offer, taking Uganda as a Jewish homeland. That offer was only rejected by his successor in the Zionist Movement two years after his death in 1905.
- 28 By addressing such sentiments for Israel, Obama has started his 2012 re-election campaign.
- 29 Israel captured East Jerusalem during the 1967 war. Since that time (44 years), Israeli archaeologists have been excavating beneath the Muslims *Aqsa Mosque* and the *Rock Dome Sanctum* for evidence that the place was Jewish.
- 30 The land on which the future Palestinian state is envisioned is not specified by Obama. In his Middle East speech (18 May 2011), Obama said, for the first time, that the borders of Israel and the future Palestinian state should be based on 1967 lines. Four days later, at an AIPAC Policy Conference the President said that 1967 lines would 'account for changes that have taken place over the last 44 years [of Israeli military occupation].' Does this imply that Obama accepts the construction of illegal settlements in the Occupied Territories, including East Jerusalem? Geneva Conventions condemn any change by force due to occupation.
- 31 See Peleg 2005.
- 32 Hebrew Literature written in various European languages revolves around one theme: a wandering Jew in pursuit of a homeland. Examples from this Literature abound. See Benjamin Disraeli's *Tancred or The New Crusade* (1847), George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) and Theodor Herzl's *Altenueland* or *The Old New Land* (1902), to name a few. Those narratives owe their substance and themes mostly to wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible, Talmudic tales, the Haskala, Hibbat

- Zion, and the Aggadah. See also Hannan Hever (2002), *Producing the Modern Canon*, New York: New York University Press.
- 33 Reference to Obama's plan to cut expenditure to meet deficit problems. The Plan was passed by the Congress on August 1, 2011, that is one day before America would be deemed by rating agencies as a failing state that could not pay back debts in due time.
  - 34 Anita Fetzer (2002), 'Put Bluntly, You Have Something of a Credibility Problem,' in Chilton and Schaffner (eds.), pp. 173-202.
  - 35 van Dijk, Teun A. (1999), 'Critical Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis,' *Discourse and Society* 10, pp. 450-459.
  - 36 Norman Fairclough (1995), *Critical Discourse Analysis*, Boston: Addison Wesley.
  - 37 'The American Dream', as a popular expression, sounds rather elusive. Martin Luther King, Jr., had a humble dream but he was assassinated in 1968 before being able to see his dream come true. Obama's book *Dreams from my Father* (1995) flows in the same vein. Yet Obama's case, as a success story, is worth-noting.
  - 38 In this connection, when Bush mentioned the term 'crusade' against Islamist terror, while addressing the Congress in the wake of 9/11, the reverberation of the term across the Muslim world was negative due to the Muslim collective consciousness of the term and its relatedness to the European successive waves of invasion and occupation of the Muslim land in the Middles Ages.
  - 39 Among those detainees are women and children. See the Israeli NGO, *Beit-Salem*, for a comprehensive report on administrative detention and arbitrary prosecution of Palestinians under occupation.
  - 40 Reference is made to Danish and Norwegian caricatures of Prophet Mohammad. Another reference goes to the American priest, from Florida, Terry Jones, who in a public scene also burnt a copy of the holy *Koran* in his Miami church.
  - 41 For security matters, the Israeli military police in Jerusalem only allow Palestinian men over fifty and women over thirty to enter the *Aqsa* Mosque to perform their Friday prayers.
  - 42 Obama made a practical move when he sent George Mitchell, as a special envoy to the Middle East, to broker a peace treaty between the Palestinian Authority and Israel. Mitchell's mission, including shuttle trips failed. Mitchell's success story to broker peace between IRA and Great Britain could not be repeated in the Middle East.
  - 43 Paul Eidelberg (2009), 'My Response to Obama's Cairo Speech,' available at: < <http://www.newswithviews.com/Eidelberg/paul106.htm>> (accessed 15 September 2010)..