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Middle-East peace talks 2010: Investigating the role of Lobbying and Advocacy groups in Washington, D.C. as spoilers

An Analysis of framing of issues and its impact on spoiling behavior

- Sabithulla Khan, MPA/ MA- IR, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs,
Syracuse University, Syracuse.

Skhan02@syr.edu

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Introduction

Since the 1990s spoiling literature, beginning with the path-breaking work of Stephen John Stedman, has tried to address the typology, number, and management of spoilers. The framework of limited and total spoilers has also been used to analyze the role of several spoilers in the development and evolution of peace-processes.

The case of Middle East peace is a rather complex one involving Israel, Palestine and the United States.

In media and academic debates, Hamas is often portrayed as the key spoiler, as an outside and total spoiler not party to the talks and which is out to thwart any peace process, while the *Palestine Authority* is portrayed as a limited spoiler, with its inability to make negotiated settlements and speak with authority, the issue remains un-resolved. Rarely is the role of other external parties, such as the media and lobbying groups, brought up in discussions, though each one of the elements have been quite extensively researched and documented.

Though there has been some interesting work done on the role of lobbying groups as spoilers by Walt and Mearsheimer, who claim that the Israeli lobby is to be blamed for its spoiling behavior, and Khaleel Marrar of De Paul, who argues the Arab lobbies are the ones to blame, the debate is not over yet and there are also glaring gaps in this debate.

I will attempt to address this gap by looking at the role of Washington DC based advocacy groups, both pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel, as well as media outlets – and their cumulative impact as spoilers in the peace-process.

Background to Spoiling:

Literature encompasses various facets of spoilers such as their nature, typology, behavior and management. As Stephen John Stedman pointed out in his seminal work *Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes*,

Peace processes create spoilers. This is a statement about definition and causality. In war there are combatants, who can be identified in myriad ways- for example rebels, bandits, pariahs, rogues or terrorists – but not as spoilers. Spoilers exist only when there is a peace

process to undermine, that is, after at least two warring parties have committed themselves to publicly to a pact or have signed a comprehensive peace agreement.ⁱ

By this definition, we cannot entirely apply the *spoiling* framework to the Middle East peace process, since both parties have not agreed to a peace proposal except in principle, to a two-state solution. However, we can analyze who is trying to stop or de-rail the process since the parties in question, the Israelis', the Palestinian representatives, and the United States, have all vocally made promises of working through the process of peace building as well as having signed various accords which have served various purposes over time.

The Middle East peace process is unique in that although the United Nations and the international community (through UNIFIL), have been involved in mediation and has historically been present in the region, the United States is the only *mediator* in the process with leverage to effect change. Even part of the most recent talks in 2010 were held in Washington, D.C., with the Obama administration playing a key role behind the scenes, driving the processes and dialogue between the parties.

Who are the Spoilers in this case?

My primary aim in this article will be answer to the question, who are the spoilers in this process, and why did the Middle East peace talks of 2010, initiated by the Obama administration, fail? The context in which the term “spoiler” is used is that of a party which is trying to thwart the progress of a peace process by putting obstacles in the way. This could be through pushing policies or public opinion in a manner which ensures there is no peace. Since “peace,” as understood in the Israel-Palestine issue, is a very complex and multi-layered problem, I will keep the analysis confined to this one aspect of spoiling behavior.

I will argue here that Israel was the *primary spoiler* in the process, with its continued expansion of settlement policies as well as a total disregard of public opinion both in the country as well as internationally. Hamas, to some extent, played the role of a *limited spoiler* by boycotting the peace-talks and not agreeing to recognize Israel, one of Israel's pre-conditions before it can talk to Hamas.

While some would argue that the biggest *spoiler* in the mix has been Hamas, which has been branded a terrorist group and continues its resistance against Israel and attacks against the state, there is also a case to be made for arguments such as those put forward by John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt. Their famous work, *Israeli Lobby and US Foreign Policy*, created a storm in the US Academic circles by laying a significant portion of the blame for lack of progress on the Israeli lobby in Washington, D.C.

The concept of spoiling as a *negotiated process*, as proposed by Karen Aggestam, will also form part of my work. The intractable nature of this conflict, which involves not only identity issues but also issues of nationalism, historical narratives as well as political calculations of super-powers, has complicated the peace process beyond one involving two or three parties. There are several autonomous decision makers in this process, including the United Nations, the US, Israel, Palestinian groups, the Israeli and Palestinian diaspora, and the refugees who have been displaced for decades and have grave misgivings about the status quo.

I will investigate this phenomenon analytically, through interviews, content analysis of media, and the messaging used by the Obama administration, the Israelis, and various lobbying groups. I will also look at how the media picks this up and presents the case, which informs public opinion.

The paper is divided into four sections:

Section 1: Introduction to and background on spoiling

Section 2: Framing, D.C. Lobbying groups and analyzing their influence on the conflict.

Section 3: Peace talks – 2010 – a case study

Section 4: Bringing it all together – conclusions

Section 1:

Hypothesis and research questions:

My hypothesis is that certain lobbying groups in Washington, D.C., on all sides of the issues *spectrum*, are *framing* the issue in a manner which aids the continued impasse. However, fresh perspectives from newly established organizations, such as *J-street*, and media outlets, such as *Al-Jazeera English*, present an *alternate framing* of issues that will tip the balance in the other direction, and we can see a perceptible shift in the direction of the peace-talks, as a consequence of a renewed American policy towards the process in the months and years to come.

The recent Arab spring that has rocked the entire Middle East and North Africa has the potential to move the framing of key issues to the negotiation in this direction. Also, the teaming up of Hamas and the Palestinian Authority in the last week of April 2011 is a good indication that there is a new vision towards achieving peace.

My sub-thesis is that the emergence of younger leaders and a change of top-brass in the Palestinian and Israeli governments will have a considerable impact on how the peace process moves ahead, as expressed in views held by scholars such as Bar Tal et al.

I will also try to answer the following questions, all pertaining to the failed Middle East peace talks of 2010:

- a) Why did the talks fail? What impact did domestic politics in Washington, D.C., including the influence of lobbying groups, have on the process?
- b) Which other “*decision units*” – apart from the parties involved (US, Palestinian and Israeli governments) had an element of influence on shaping these decisions?
- c) Who are the “lobbies” in Washington, D.C. that impact the process and act as spoilers? How do they work with media and other “influencers” to frame issues key to the peace-talks?

The last question is rather difficult and controversial to answer simply because of the nature of US domestic politics as well as the *perceived* favoritism demonstrated by the US.

Section 2: Explaining the role of lobbying and advocacy groups in framing of people and issues in the conflict

I believe it is important to clearly define what we mean by lobbying. The term itself has come to mean several things and can be interpreted to differently depending on the context and the people using it. While it does involve an element of *advocacy* and *awareness creation*, an organization can be considered a *lobbying group* if it meets the following two criterion:

1. It is registered as a 501(c) 4 organization, i.e. its employees spend more than 20% of their time on lobbying activities and are federally registered lobbyists.
2. It has a legally independent Political Action Committee - which can endorse and raise funds for candidates for federal officeⁱⁱ.

There are also other advocacy groups in DC, which are 501(c) 3 organizations, and spend up to 20% of their time on lobbying related work.

There are also organizations which carry out Public awareness campaigns about the Israel-Palestine peace process, but are in no way involved in advocacy. The Arab American Institute would be an example of an organization which falls into this category. In my opinion, Thomas Dye's definition of a lobby, which says a lobby is "anyone working to influence government policies and actions" is a bit too loose use as, in this regard, the number of Arab lobbies possibly equal that of Israeli lobbies, but their effectiveness can be questionedⁱⁱⁱ.

The special relationship that exists between the US and Israel can be traced back to 1981 with the signing of the "Memorandum of Understanding between the government of the United States and the Government of Israel on Strategic Cooperation". This relationship has been managed very well with the most powerful lobby in Washington, D.C., namely the American Israeli Public Affairs Council (AIPAC).

The Arab counterpart to this movement of pro-Israeli activism is the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA), which is now defunct. Marrar points out that the reason they failed was that they could not speak with one voice about the Palestinian issue and, at the same time, could not provide any tangible, actionable steps to carry out, nor did they offer alternative

solutions that could be used. He quotes a basic dictum of Foreign Policy Analysis: “When there is no basic perception or recognition of an organization’s goals on the policy maker level, there is no effective action to be taken.”

This could be attributed to the lack of strategic thinking among the Arab groups as well as lack of effective policy making on their behalf, as they were unable push ideas and suggest pragmatic solutions the US administrations could adopt.

Marrar^{iv} states that the *Intifada* from 1987 to 1993 altered the game in favor of the pro-Arab lobbies, making the discourse of a two-state solution mainstream in both US domestic politics and foreign policy. He further notes that during the Bush era, the notion of the *two state solution* gained ground which can be largely attributed to the Arab lobby’s efforts. The *Oslo peace accords* gave the Palestinians recognition as a people who were capable of self-government, and forced them to settle for a lesser fraction of land than they originally had. Marrar also claims that for the first time, pro-Israeli lobbyists were not the only ones shaping the discourse on this issue. He points out that the alliances formed by the pro-Arab lobby, such as with the National Council of Catholic Bishops and other organizations which saw reason in supporting the Palestinian cause, can be seen as an example of this process of building influence.

It is widely acknowledged that the US has historically favored Israel when it comes to security issues, as well as other contentious issues involved in the peace talks, mainly a) Settlements, b) Right to return and c) Return of Palestinian territories occupied after 1967.

The basic principles of the peace that needs to be achieved have been agreed upon, but not yet reached. Noam Chomsky and Ilan Pappé point this out in their latest book *Gaza in crisis: reflections on Israel’s war against the Palestinians*^v saying, “...virtually the entire world, including the Arab states, (who go on to call for full normalization of relations), the Organization of Islamic states (including Iran), and relevant non-state actors (including Hamas). A settlement along these lines was first proposed at the first UN Security Council in January 1976 by the major Arab states. Israel refused to attend the session. The United States vetoed the resolution, and did so again in 1980. The record at the General Assembly since is similar,” they point out.

This, Walt and Mearsheimer have claimed, is the result of the work done by AIPAC and other lobbying groups based in Washington, D.C. and has historically shaped the thinking in D.C. policy circles.

So, are these lobbying groups powerful enough to impact decisions in the US Senate? How key is their power in determining the outcome of the peace-talks? Are they powerful enough to act as spoilers? These are some questions that need further probing.

Pro-Palestinian think-tanks and advocacy groups

While a cursory glance at the political and advocacy landscape shows that the Palestinian groups have minimal influence, it is not to deny their existence. However, the impact of their work on Washington, D.C. politics is minimal, if anything^{vi}.

Ori Nir, spokesperson of Americas for Peace Now an organization based in Washington, D.C. which is considered an authority on the settlement issue, points out, “The discourse about the Middle East peace process is exclusively carried out by pro-Israel groups. The pro-Palestine groups have been missing in action, and their impact is marginal,” an organization based in Washington, D.C., which is considered an authority on the settlement issue. There are a few players in Washington, D.C. including the American Task Force for Palestine and the Anti-discrimination Committee, among others.

Pro-Israeli groups – working against Israel’s interests?

Quite recently, other advocacy groups in Washington, DC., mainly Americans for Peace Now and J-street, have sought a more critical evaluation of this dynamic and have claimed that this head in the sand approach towards Israel’s continued expansion of settlements and gross violation of human-rights hurts Israel in the long-run.

Most recently, J-street created a storm with its activities, resulting in a meeting of the Israeli Knesset Committee for Immigration, Absorption and Diaspora Affairs on March 23 to debate whether the left-leaning group is anti-Israel^{vii}, with its public criticism of Israel’s settlement policies among other issues. The founder of J-Street, Jeremy Ben Ami visited Israel, in effort to explain the working and philosophy of the group which he claimed, “It’s time to embrace our movement as an ally of Israel and to abandon efforts to push those who disagree with the

government's policy out of the communal tent. I intend to tell the Knesset that I started J Street because of my family's deep four-generation connection to Israel and because of the importance I place on there being a secure national home for the Jewish people that promotes the Jewish and democratic values on which I was raised.”^{viii}

The debate rages on and it remains to be seen how the most influential groups in the US are able to work in tandem with stake-holders to influence decisions regarding the peace process. There have been heated debates about this issue as well as a wide spectrum of voices heard, including those in support of J-street. This quote from the President of the New Israel Fund is instructive:

Let us be clear about what is happening here. Proponents of a narrow, demagogic, ultra-nationalist, pro-settlement, anti-peace point of view have decided that every other point of view is illegitimate. They believe that only they can define what it means to love and support Israel and what is best for its future. In so doing, they undermine Israel's standing as a liberal democracy, alienate its most stalwart supporters in the Jewish world, and sadly contribute to its de-legitimization in the international arena.

It is also worth noting that J-street organized a 3 day conference February 26-March 1, 2011, which brought together 4 members of the Knesset, several key political commentators from the US, members of the media as well as officials from the Obama administration. The total attendance in the conference was over 3,000 people each day on average.

At the very least, the conference, as well as J-street and its allies, have created a new discourse and perhaps a new *language* to talk about the Middle East peace process and it seems like they are here to stay. It remains to be seen how much they are able to impact the process and where the discourse moves to – both in direction and its impact.

So, the question one needs to naturally ask is: Are they playing the role of “spoilers”? Is AIPAC or J-street using its influence in a manner which derails the peace-process and the talks?

Section 3: Historic framing of the issue – in Washington, D.C. and the US

The historical framing of the Israel-Palestine conflict has been one of David and Goliath, where Israelis are portrayed as the victims after the Holocaust (and rightly so), and now as victims of Arab aggression, a very wrong idea which continues to this day – on almost every level of discussion. This setting of tone, going back to even before the establishment of Israel as a state in 1948, is quite unprecedented and happened because of the battle for ideas, information and political mobilization – and as a result, the framing had already happened very effectively^{ix}.

In his book *Arab Voices*, James Zogby points out that for the western audience, the media has been the primary source of information. An example he shares is that of Leon Uris's *Exodus*, which tends to paint an intensely sympathetic view of the Israeli settlers in Palestine. To quote Zogby, "Stories have circulated for years that Uris's two years of on-site research for the book were funded by a New York public-relations executive named Edward Gottlieb, who was looking for ways to improve Israel's image in the West."^x

He further argues that the Israeli story is presented in the context of the Biblical prophecies and "shared values" of the US and Israel, while the Palestinian narrative is missing in most important discourses.

Due to this sense of favoritism towards the Israelis, the US is not seen as an honest broker, and the Palestinians have a deep rooted mistrust of deals brokered by the sole-super-power which remains a dilemma for everyone involved.

Framing the Palestinians as the "un trust-worthy" side

The most recent Accords between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority has been portrayed by the American Israeli Public Affairs Council (AIPAC) as a "dangerous" move, as Hamas is still viewed as a terrorist organization by the US.^{xi} The framing of this move, which is seen among both academics and policy-makers^{xii} as the first positive move towards forming a representative government that the Israelis and Americans can deal with, is noteworthy. AIPAC has continuously sought to portray any efforts towards conciliation and movement in a negative light, casting doubts on how this would move forward. This has also been the position taken by

the Israeli government – which has continuously argued that it cannot negotiate with a divided house – referring to the Palestinian side, with a fractured Hamas and Palestine Authority.

Israeli settlements, Media framing and Al Jazeera

Edward Said argues that there is a perception in the West to associate any resistance to Israel with terrorism, communism, and anti-Semitism^{xiii}.

One can see that the rhetoric of “war on terror” has been misused and the people of Gaza in particular have had to pay a rather heavy price. Ilan Pappé and Noam Chomsky in their book *Gaza in Crisis* point out that there has been nearly global agreement about the pre-June 1967 borders with the exception of Israel and the US, who has vetoed several Security Council resolutions seeking to establish the pre-1967 border and resolve the issue once and for all.^{xiv}

The blockade of Gaza and suffering of the civilians who have to endure it is another case of framing of issues to continue existing policies.

While the key issue to continuing the collective punishment of Gazans through not only military blockade, but also bombing and other acts of intimidation, as evidenced in the most recent all-out assault on Gaza in December 2008 points to this fact.

As Pappé and Chomsky point out, the continued framing of the Gazans as “others” allows the collective punishment of civilians to weed out Hamas and is a strategy consistently deployed by the Israeli government.^{xv}

This has allowed several instances of un-justified attacks on civilians, in which thousands have died, and the continued blockage of essential commodities in the region, including food items. The World Food Program estimates that about 400 trucks of food are needed every day to survive, while about just 653 trucks were allowed in the week of May 10 2009^{xvi}.

As Chomsky and Pappé point out, speaking of Al-Jazeera:

In the 105 countries lacking our efficient modalities of self-censorship, people could see what was happening hourly and the impact is said to be very great. In the United States, the New York Times reports, the “near-total blackout...is no doubt related to the sharp criticism Al Jazeera received from the United States government during the

initial stages of the war in Iraq for its coverage of the American Invasion. Cheney and Rumsfeld objected, so, obviously, the independent media could only obey.”

It should not be forgotten that the western media has also played a part in this framing. Until the arrival of Al Jazeera, the frames and images accessible to western audiences were the ones shown on CNN and other English language networks.

So, is the emergence of this alternate framing something that is significant, or is it just another way of looking at the same problem? Al Jazeera seems to have earned the respect of peers such as the New York Times, which points out that the channel has been consistently broadcasting live from the scenes of protests in the Arab world^{xvii} despite the blockade and continues to do “live and aggressive reporting”.

Peace-talks 2010: A case study

It would be useful to start an analysis of the case study by looking at where we stand today vis-à-vis the Middle East peace talks. The most recent initiative to start peace talks was taken by the Obama administration when it initiated the September 2010 talks in Egypt between the Israeli government, represented by Benjamin Netanyahu, and the Palestinian Authority, represented by Mahmoud Abbas. Hamas, which controls the Gaza strip, was not present, as the US government does not recognize it as the representative of the Palestinian people and considers it a terrorist organization. King Abdulla of Jordan and President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt were also present as interlocutors. Egypt has traditionally been the representative of the “Arab people,” and its impact on the process cannot be under-estimated, albeit symbolically. However, the talks failed, not surprisingly, after the Israeli settlement construction activity re-started while the talks were still on^{xviii}.

The Arab foreign ministers rejected further peace talks unless there is a settlement freeze from Israel’s side. This was announced in December 2010 by the Arab League chief Amr Moussa.^{xix} They have also indicated that the Arab League would seek a Security Council resolution against Israel’s continued building of settlements in the occupied West Bank area.

Even before the talks began, there were differing views about who would be the potential spoiler, with some saying that Hamas could play the spoiler again. An article on Fox News reflects this view reporting: “Middle East peace talks got under way Thursday for the first time in nearly two years with a violent reminder sent by the Palestinian terror group Hamas that it will try to torpedo any agreement struck in Washington between Israelis and the Palestinian Authority.”^{xx}

There is also a widely held view amongst Palestinians that Israel is “eating the pie that it wants to negotiate about dividing,^{xxi}” and hence could be the key *spoiler* in the process. Apart from these two parties, there are other external forces – the key being the *Israeli lobby*, the *Palestinian advocacy groups*, and the *media*, which shapes public opinion and could have had potentially damaging effect on the peace talks. Public opinion is not a spoiler as such, but is instead a source of spoiling behavior that can lead the key decision makers to behave in a certain way.

The position of various parties involved in the conflict is included in Table 1: See appendix.

Decision unit analysis and framing

In this section, I will look at how the decisions made during the peace-talks were made, the reasoning behind those decisions, and the behavior of the leaders involved. This approach follows from the work done by Margaret Hermann of Syracuse University and her colleagues, who have worked on the decision outcomes of various decision units, predominant leader, single group or coalition of autonomous actors, in shaping foreign policy decisions; as well as that of Robert Entman of North Carolina State University.

Decision units are important to understand what triggers the governments to take foreign policy decisions, as well as what prods powerful leaders, single groups, and coalitions into action. Also, what is it about the political setting that leads one or the other of these different types of decision units to assume authority at any point in time? How do we know which of the three types of decision units should be the focus of our attention in studying a particular event? The answers to these questions form the inputs for the application of the decision units approach and start the framework in motion. Of interest is what precipitates a foreign policy decision and a particular decision unit taking action. The inputs to the framework represent the stimuli from the

international and domestic environments to which the authoritative decision unit is responding.^{xxii}

Under the frame-work there are three types of decision units, namely:

1. Predominant leader: single individual who has the ability to stifle all opposition and dissent as well as the power to make a decision alone, if necessary.
2. Single group: A set of individuals, all of whom are members of a single body, who collectively select a course of action in consultation with each other.
3. Coalition of Autonomous actors : The necessary actors are separate individuals, groups, or representatives of institutions which, if some or all concur, can act for the government, but no one of which by itself has the ability to decide and force compliance on the others; moreover, no overarching authoritative body exists in which all these actors are members.

So, what was the decision unit making the decisions in the 2010 peace talks?

As we apply this framework to the Middle East framework, we realize there was a coalition of autonomous actors in play during the Middle-East peace talks.

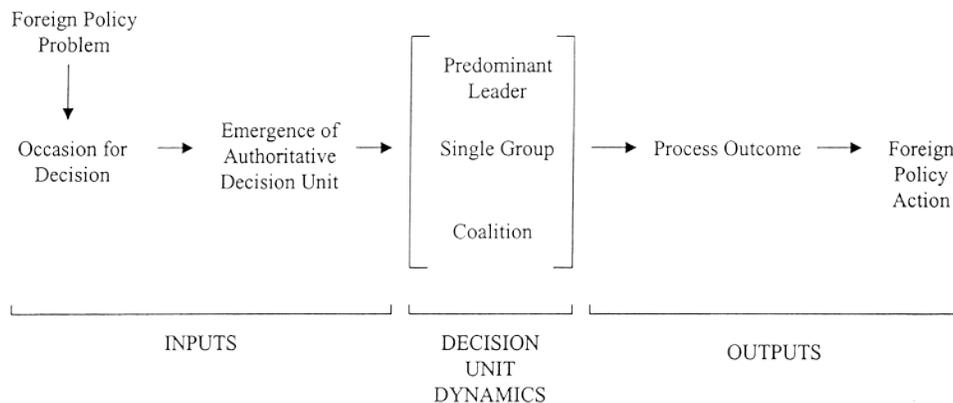


Figure 1. Decision units framework

Source: How decision units shape foreign policy, Margaret Hermann, Et al. International Studies Association, 2001.

The theory of coalition of autonomous actors points out that the basic political processes within a coalition of autonomous actors is influenced by the nature of the rules and procedures guiding interaction, the "rules of the game" that shape what is possible (see Hagan, 1993, 1994, 1995;

Kaarbo, 1996; Hermann and Hagan, 1998). In particular, we are interested in the degree to which political procedures and norms are well established and "institutionalized."

The key contingency in this case can be considered as lack of any agreed norms, as the US-Israel-Palestine relationship has been one of shifting balances with the Israel- US relationship being the only stable relationship.

The push and pull of ideas and positions during the Middle East peace talks 2010 was fascinating, with the Obama administration trying helplessly to get the Israelis to stop the settlements to no avail, since the agreement to stop settlements ended amidst the peace talks and the Israelis started building again leading to the collapse of the talks.

Framing of the issues - Settlement issue in particular

To see the impact of the influence and direction of the peace-talks, I believe it is crucial we look at the framing of issues during the peace talks. Framing, as defined by Robert Entman, is "Selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation and/or solution."^{xxiii}

The Israeli government's stance was one of unequivocal determination to continue with settlement activity, regardless of its impact on the peace-talks.

This seems to be that of the stance taken by AIPAC and other strongly pro-Israeli groups (see table attached) – who have consistently refused to see the settlement issue as anything but a tiny irritant in the project to secure Israel. This continued indifference to the *key issue* for Palestinians leaves much to be desired when it comes to negotiations and resumption of peace-talks.

The Palestinian opposition to dis-continue talks while the settlement activity ongoing was a principled one and one that had been agreed upon earlier. To quote Washington post, which in its article on 3 October 2010 said: "Hanan Ashrawi, a member of the PLO Executive Committee, said that there was a firm consensus among all factions at the Ramallah meeting that talks could not proceed as long as Israeli settlement building continued."^{xxiv}

Occasion for decision: Settlement freeze ends during the peace talks – Israeli government continues settlement construction.

To analyze the Middle East peace talks 2010, and to de-construct what went wrong and why, I will look at one occasion for decision – the decision by Israel to resume the construction of West Bank settlements, when the peace talks were ongoing.

An article from the *Guardian* in September 2010 sums up the arguments at the time: “The US repeated its demand that Israel extend a 10-month partial freeze on settlement building before it expires later this month. ‘We think it makes sense to extend the moratorium,’ said President Barack Obama's Middle East envoy George Mitchell immediately after the summit at the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. Palestinian negotiators have repeatedly made clear that talks cannot continue if the freeze is not extended but Israeli officials countered that an ‘all or nothing’ strategy could paralyze negotiations.”^{xxv}

On 26 September 2010, the 10 month moratorium on settlement freeze (of West Bank settlements) ended, and the Israeli coalition government refused to extend the moratorium.

This led to the collapse of the talks as PA president Mahmoud Abbas had already indicated before the talks began that this would be a pre-condition to the talks and without a moratorium on ban of construction, there would be no talks.

Decision unit:

The decision units involved in this process were the Israeli government as well as the Palestinian Authority.

Decision making process:

New York Times reported the incident saying that at first US officials worked to win Israeli approval for a new 90-day moratorium on most construction in the West Bank, but gave up in December 2010 after weeks of fruitless haggling.

It went on to say: “The US administration had offered Israelis 20 advanced American fighter jets and other unspecified military aid, as well as American promises not to seek any further moratoriums and to oppose any Palestinian attempt to obtain international recognition of

statehood.” It is believed that Mr. Netanyahu said he supported the deal, but failed to persuade his cabinet to accept it.

Officials from the US administration have said they decided to call it quits because they concluded that after the 90-day negotiating period materialized, “it would not have produced the progress on core issues that the administration originally had hoped for.”^{xxvi}

Decision outcomes:

The outcome of the continued impasse was to stall the talks and continue the stalemate. The Washington Post reported that the Palestinian Authority would not continue talks unless Israel stopped settlement construction activity in the West Bank.^{xxvii}

So, who was the spoiler here? Was it the Palestinian Authority which refused to talk further after the Israelis re-started settlement activity? Or was it the Israeli government, which simply refused to stop the construction of the settlements, knowing that this would be a game changer?

Did lobbying groups have any impact on the 2010 peace talks?

“No,” says an informed Policy maker in Washington, D.C.^{xxviii} “It was chiefly domestic politics and Israeli government responsible for the impasse. Obama pulled in one direction, while Netanyahu in another. We need to understand why wasn’t Obama tougher? The reason is that there is a fear that the pro-Israeli lobby such as AIPAC will mobilize the Jewish community against the democrats, and put pressure. Leverage its pressure against the administration, and that is a strong de-motivator for Obama before mid-term elections.”

This is both a simple explanation and a complex way to look at an issue which continues to defy logic. Perhaps one could understand this issue from the framework of bureaucratic politics, but a far simpler explanation is possible.

Section 3 (a): Media and alternate framing

Interview with Riz Khan, Anchor at Al-Jazeera – on the impact of media framing on the Middle-East peace process.

Q: What are your impressions of the failed peace talks – 2010? What do you make of it?

Riz Khan: I don't know all the specifics. But I do know one thing – that the USA has been pre-occupied and the Obama administration has had a lot to deal with. The economy, coming close up to the re-election campaign, the president himself has been pre-occupied. And also I don't know how strongly they felt about the legitimacy of the players. Mahmoud Abbas, has been considered the main person to talk to, but his power base has been fragmented by the Hamas; so people wonder if he truly represents the Palestinians.

The other thing is, as well, that the Palestinian papers have compromised what we know. According to them, the Palestinians were willing to give more than what we are told and the Israelis were unwilling to compromise. Netanyahu also had a terse relationship with Obama and the power of the lobby – AIPAC forced the president if he would continue the support, and to do this; he would have to be a bit soft on him.

So, it seems that president Obama has had to back down so many times. I have been to conferences where people have even described him as a “coward,” for not being strong enough in his convictions. He came in with these strong convictions, with the Cairo speech and vision; but failed to deliver. He has been bowing to power, and the horrible thing about political life is compromise and I remember Hillary Clinton going to the Palestinian territories and being shocked with the conditions. When she ran for the senate, and the constituency was largely pro-Israeli, she did a turn-about and said that the war was valid and that Israel needed to defend itself. She again had to flip-flop on her position as well. Obama also has not been in a strong position. He has been pre-occupied and he has allowed himself to be pressured.

There is also limited value and prestige when it comes to leadership and when it actually comes to achieving things.

Q: In terms of media process, how has the framing happened?

RK: You must remember that the media has various levels. At the US, international level and the local national level.

Essentially, international news, like most other news is reactive. The local news in the USA is not going to give anything of any value. So, people here don't have any clue of what's going on. The national media here is also limited except for a few media such as the NPR, which had a few interesting discussions around the peace talks, and PBS too.

The American public is blind as to what is going on about the mid-east process. The international media is guilty of knee-jerk reaction. What's the story of the day?

Visit of Netanyahu or Secretary of state to the region.

We are a bit different in that we have been able to provide more context, breadth and background; and that is largely due to the heritage of our channel – being Arab and Middle Eastern.

The trouble is that we do have a knee-jerk reaction and the over-all picture is lost in the sound-bites.

I was on a panel today with the former ambassador of Jordan to USA, and he actually said the trouble is that people expect us to keep things separate. What is happening in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Mixing the Palestinian –Israeli issue in the mix is just confusing for people. But he is right in saying that unless we solve the issue; there is a lot that is going to come back and bite the leaders back.

The leadership here is talking about safety of civilians, security and the government cannot be bombing civilians. When Israel struck Lebanon in summer of 2006. Gaza also witnessed the same thing; so we are seeing the same double-standards, which is what upsets people. Of course, the US is in a tricky position; and is considered to have an uneven hand. Even many American politicians are coming to understand and appreciate this.

We have seen this in the fracture that has appeared, in the emergence of J-street.

That's another factor, but overall the media has failed to truly educate the public (American media), because they don't have the motivation, or any interest. The American public has very little interest in news in general, so it's a difficult game for them to play.

Q: What do you make of J-street and other alternate voices that are emerging in the political advocacy spectrum? How influential have they been?

RK: They have tried a bit. There are a number of groups, One Voice and others, who have come together. They are trying to be pro-active and engaged. Unfortunately, when there is good news, the media is not going to be interested.

The media is not going to write much about stories that say Palestinians and Israelis are sitting side by side and doing good things. Only when there are bullets hitting people, is there news. That's very sad, and the issue we face here is that, to get the counter-movements to have any real space is hard.

I don't think people in this country realize how strong the movement is in the Israeli public to counter what is happening. There are big divisions in Israeli society about what is the *right thing* to do.

Some realize that the occupation cannot go on. There are Israeli groups protesting at the checkpoints and helping Palestinians get through. I was there for the 60th anniversary of the creation of Israel – *Nakba* – as the Palestinians call it. It's easy to understand this new generation, who don't know their history well. They don't understand why the Palestinians live such a miserable life.

I think some of them have been indoctrinated into thinking that this is their land and what are the Palestinians protesting about, whereas in theory they could be sharing this piece of land.

Now the question of a two state solution is very much in question, because the land in the Palestinian side is fragmented heavily. The wall, the settlements are creating a huge bridge.

Q: Inclusiveness of Hamas – Is there a trend in the media not to give it legitimacy even though it won the 2006 elections?

RK: We at AJ have discussed this a lot. In the West, there is a failure to understand that Hamas is not just the military arm, but there is also a social service arm to it; and it fills the gap, which people need. The same with Hizbollah so unfortunately, on the ground, the reality is different from what is shown on TV and picture.

It tends to be one-sided and echoes what the politicians want you to see and hear. AJ was framed as a terrorist network, sponsored by Osama bin Laden by Donald Rumsfeld, the former Defense Secretary. His statements were inaccurate, that we had shown beheadings etc. There was a lack of understanding, and also misinformation.

Now, people watch it and now Hillary Clinton quoted that how we cover these issues properly and how others don't. I think it is the height of ignorance to criticize something without having any knowledge of the issue.

So, I have no time for such people. It goes back to my school days, when I knew a guy who did not apparently like pizza, and I finally established that he had never tasted pizza. So, it's the same principle.

You know, it's a shame, but it is how it is.

Q: Will the Arab spring directly impact the Middle East peace process?

RK: Not yet. I think it's going to take some time. No one has really covered how the Palestinians have reacted to this movement in the Arab world.

I think everyone is waiting to see if the change in the Middle East will change the paradigm in the peace process, but so far; there is no indication of that.

The irony of this is that, there are a lot of ships in the Middle East. We thought of Saudi aligning with the US to fight Iran, and the sectarian (Sunni-Shia) split which was highlighted with Bahrain, raised fears about the Middle East being an ethnic battle field more than anything else.

This is intriguing and may come up more and more.

I have heard many commentators say that Iran is just sitting and watching all of this. The other guys are just beating themselves up.

Q: US ambivalence towards the issue. How can one understand this, in the context of it being the sole super-power and the only one with the ability to influence the decision substantially?

RK: It depends on who you mean by the US. If you mean the US politicians, yes, they are totally pre-occupied with domestic issues – deficits, collective bargaining issues etc. What bothers me most is that the previous administrations over-emphasis on American security. This whole sense of creating a sense of fear was detrimental to the quality of life in this country.

When I see Colin Powell and actually seeing him being searched and wanded electronically at the Airport by security guards. It shows you that things are really going to be crazy. Even top officials are going to bear the brunt of it.

Ironically, Al-Qaeda has succeeded in doing far more than just killing people and destroying two buildings. They have disrupted American lifestyle to a degree where I don't see it recovering quickly.

Media also continues to exaggerate these issues.

The peace talks have to be addressed for any progress to be made. Hillary Clinton is a smart woman and she knows that this is something that needs to be dealt with. Sadly, when people play politics, people do know that the real issues get sidelined. When people are looking to get re-elected, or looking for support or funds; the issues that affect people's day to day issues are lost. The Israelis and Palestinians are caught up in the shadows of an election cycle. It's more vigorous than ever.

Section 4: Conclusion

The stalled talks do not mean that the prospects for peace are dead. There is a growing momentum, from those in the policy circles in Washington, D.C., the media and other stakeholders, as well as larger forces which will perhaps prove to be the game-changer. The upcoming announcement by Palestine about its statehood in September is likely to be another big event which all the stakeholders are keeping an eye on.

Will the ongoing Arab revolutions in the region be a catalyst towards pushing the Israeli government to take serious steps to sign a peace treaty and recognize the state of Palestine? Will the April 27th agreement between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority lead to peace between the Palestinians and Israelis? These are questions that will determine the future of the region.

How will the US manage Hamas, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel, the key stakeholders and spoilers in the process? Will the US be a *spoiler* in itself by not taking a stand on this issue and by not being an “honest broker” to the peace talks? These are also tough questions that need answering.

Roger Cohen, Political Columnist for the NY Times recently pointed out^{xxix} :

I have rarely witnessed as uplifting as the events in Tahrir Square. What could be our souls and hearts, than peoples throwing off oppression and gaining their dignity. It would be a pity, if this new Middle East is amassed by an old Israel. A new Middle East requires new thinking by Israel. Contrary to President Netanyahu’s grim predictions, this is about Arabs – trying to gain institutions, rights, dignity and freedom. Why do I think this is hopeful? Prime Minister Netanyahu is wrong in keeping this siege mentality in Israel, which is so negative.

The upheavals, I believe have started a new rhetoric in the region, and hopefully one of peace and stability, he added.

Not so, points out a professor of Middle Eastern Studies^{xxx}. “The rhetoric in Israeli right-wing media is that of harking back to 1967 war, with Israel being surrounded by a hostile group of Arabs. The myth of Israelis being in an existential crisis plays out, yet again”.

Jerusalem post recently reported that: “Netanyahu is aware of Peres’s belief that the upheavals in the Middle East make it imperative to try and quickly come to an agreement with the Palestinians before a new Middle East order is set, so that when the rulers of this new order come to power, the Israeli-Palestinian issue will no longer be at the top of the regional agenda.”^{xxxix}

A group of prominent former members of the defense establishment, including former heads of the Mossad and the Shin Bet, the Israel Security Agency, presented an initiative for peace with the Arab world this week. The plan calls for a Palestinian state comprising most of the West Bank and Gaza, with east Jerusalem as its capital. The initiative also calls for an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. While the Israeli peace initiative is well-intentioned, it remains to be seen how the Israeli administration reacts to it and how much of it enters the discussion that is ongoing in the policy circles in Israel.

The strategy to *manage the spoilers* in this case may well be to deal with each player in terms that are feasible for its own self-interest. It may make sense to include Hamas in negotiations, and the US should perhaps push Israel to accept it as a legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, along with the PA. As Marwan Bishara of Al Jazeera pointed out recently at the J-street conference^{xxxii}: “Let’s not forget the Mecca agreement in 2007, when Hamas agreed to two principles: they will respect all previous agreements between the PLO and Israel and they will entrust the PLO to negotiate on behalf of Palestinians, on the condition that it will be put to poll and referendum of Palestinians. They have agreed to it already. Overall, Hamas has been playing that sort of a role, to be both a Muslim brother hood and political party. Washington did not pick up on this, unfortunately”.

This is echoed by Jean Daniel, who during the J-street conference pointed out: “The Palestinians don’t have bargaining power. A unity power of free and fair elections will give a good backbone to the negotiations. If in one way, we bring Hamas to the table, if we consider them as a society, there will be less movement to *spoil* the process. Another aspect is the role played by Syria. It is a matter of working on the Palestinian track and that other track is also important; to influence Hamas.”^{xxxiii}

There seems to be a growing acknowledgement even in the Obama administration that the longer this impasse continues, the harder it will be to reach a sustainable peace. Dennis Ross, Special

Assistant to the President and Senior Director for the Central Region said at the J-street conference in March 2011: “I do want to make broader points that provide perspective. The first point is that there a number of clocks that are ticking. The longer it takes, the harder it becomes to have a two- state solution.”

It seems right that the solutions may perhaps come from a new, younger leadership, as Cohen points out: “What do great leaders do? They seize the moment, and in seizing it, express what is eternal and timeless.”

Appendix:

Table 1: Mapping the stake-holders Position: 2010 Peace-talks

Stake-Holder	Settlements	Refugees	Jerusalem	Security
Israel	The Israeli government insists on keeping the major Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Any departure from this would break up the coalition which forms the government	Israel rejects the idea that Palestinian refugees from previous wars should be allowed any "right of return" to their former homes. They say that this is a device to destroy the state of Israel by demography in order to re-establish a unitary state of Palestine.	The Israeli government is unwilling to divide Jerusalem, held to be the political and religious center of the Jewish people. It stands by the 1980 basic Israeli law that "Jerusalem, complete and united, is the capital of Israel"	The Israeli government is afraid that a Palestinian state might one day fall into the hands of Hamas and will be used as a stepping-stone to turning Israel into Palestine. Therefore it is insisting that it keeps a large measure of security control, including in the Jordan Valley, and that a state of Palestine be largely demilitarized.
Palestine Authority	Ideally, the Palestinians would like all settlements to be abandoned as they were in Gaza. However,	Formally, they maintain the "right of return", arguing that without it a great injustice would not be put right.	The Palestinians want East Jerusalem, which was controlled by Jordan before being captured by the Israelis in 1967, as the capital	They argue that security will come from a stable two-state solution not the other way round. They want as many attributes of a normal state as

	<p>they appear to accept that some will have to stay but they will argue for a minimum number and a land swap for any that are left. They threatened to leave the talks if the Israeli moratorium was ended on 26 September.</p>	<p>However, there has been regular talk among Palestinians that this "right" could be met by compensation. They refuse to recognize the concept of Israel as a "Jewish state", saying that this is unnecessary and that it ignores the Israeli-Arab citizens of Israel</p>	<p>of a Palestinian state. The Old City contains the third holiest place in Islam, the al-Aqsa mosque, and the Dome of the Rock, from where Mohammed is said to have visited heaven on his winged steed Burak</p>	<p>possible. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas fears that client-status would be untenable and open to a Hamas takeover</p>
<p>Hamas</p>	<p>Totally opposed to the settlement issue. Does not recognize the legal status of Israel.</p>	<p>Demands return of the Islamic rule and all its original inhabitants.</p>	<p>The Islamic Resistance Movement believes that the land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf consecrated for future Muslim generations until Judgment Day. It, or any part of it, should not be</p>	<p>Is all for self-determination and self-rule, with no interference from the Israeli side.</p>

			squandered: it, or any part of it, should not be given up.(From the Hamas Charter).	
US Administration	As with the annexation of East Jerusalem, the US has not recognized the international legitimacy of the Israeli West Bank settlements. But it accepts their reality and will press for compromise. It is also trying to reach a compromise on the moratorium problem	The US understands the Israeli refusal to take back refugees and hopes that this can be resolved by compensation and development aid for this whose cannot go back to their previous family homes.	The US does not recognize the Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem and maintains its embassy in Tel Aviv. President Barack Obama has opposed the building of housing for Israelis in East Jerusalem though he said before becoming president that dividing the city would be "very difficult to execute".	The US accepts the Israeli need for security but also the need for Palestinian statehood and reconciling these is the aim of its diplomacy. It is unlikely, however, to recognize a state of Palestine which has not emerged from negotiation.

Lobby groups				
Stake-Holder	Settlements	Refugees	Jerusalem	Security
Pro-Israel : AIPAC	Pro-settlements and rights of Israel to build new ones.	Should not be allowed to come back as it will alter the demographics of Israeli state.	Should be the undivided capital of Israel, as it has the right to the city, historically and culturally ^{xxxiv} .	Israel has the right to protect itself against hostile neighbors and non-state actors.
J- Street	Should be stopped, but existing ones should remain ^{xxxv}	Should be settled outside Israel's border, while receiving compensation ^{xxxvi}	Supports Clinton parameters, where Jewish parts would go to Israel and Arab part to Palestinians	Supports a viable and safe state of Palestine, while holding Hamas accountable for its acts of violence.
Pro-Palestine :				
American Task force for Palestine	Evacuation of all settlements, except those mutually agreed	Just solution based on UN resolutions	Shared Palestine between Palestine and Israel	Safe Israel and Palestine co-existing side by side
Arab American institute	Evacuation of all settlements, except those mutually agreed	Favor right to return	US should oppose unilateral actions against settling this issue.	Safe Israel and Palestine co-existing side by side
Arab Anti-Discrimination league	Evacuation of all settlements, except those mutually agreed	Just solution based on UN resolutions	Shared Palestine between Palestine and Israel	Safe Israel and Palestine co-existing side by side

(Source: BBC online. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11138790>)

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^{xxx} Confidential interview on 5/2/2011

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^{xxxiv} http://www.aipac.org/For_Hill_Staff/IssueArchive_19352.asp

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