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The Obama and Netanyahu Speeches: The Palestinian Perspective

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After a period of heightened expectations regarding a series of speeches by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu, from the Palestinian perspective the mountain turned out to be little more than a molehill. The Palestinians were not given any incentive to reexamine their strategy in anticipation of September 2011. In their view, the speeches were a combination of a very grudging gesture toward them accompanied by a heap of bitter pills to swallow.

Obama's speeches affirmed Palestinian positions in three major areas. The first is the stipulation that the border between Israel and the future Palestinian state be based on the 1967 borders with land swaps. (Despite its importance, however, this statement was somewhat lacking from the Palestinian perspective because there was no mention that the land swaps would be equal, i.e., that the area of the future Palestinian state would be the same size as the areas conquered in 1967. This principle was already proposed by Secretary of State Clinton, but Obama did not repeat it.)

The second affirmation concerned the order of issues to be discussed in future Israeli-Palestinian negotiations: according to the President, negotiations would first cover borders and security, and only afterwards deal with other issues. This stance contradicts the Israeli position whereby the Palestinians must first recognize Israel as a Jewish state, after which the discussions would focus on security; only later would it be possible to discuss the remaining issues. The Palestinians are not excited by Obama's approach, because they fear it suggests engagement in a gradual process of implementing partial agreements before the final settlement; nonetheless, it still has some advantages for them. It would force Netanyahu to reveal his territorial cards at an early stage and to draw lines on the map, steps he is quite reluctant to take. One may also presume that if negotiations over borders and security were to go well they would be able to remove a principal obstacle, i.e., construction in the Jewish settlements of the West Bank, because it would be clear where Israel could continue building and where it could not. Because of this, the Palestinians are ultimately prepared to accept this approach. Finally, Obama accepted the position that the undermining of stability in the Middle East as a result of the "Arab spring" is no reason for

further suspension of the political process, rather an incentive to make greater efforts to succeed.

On the other hand, Obama's speeches included many points that embraced Israeli positions, much to the dismay of the Palestinians: first, regarding the need to recognize Israel as a Jewish state; second, use of the term secure and recognized borders (this was made even clearer in Obama's speech before AIPAC, when he said that the land swaps would be based on both demographic and security considerations); third, not only was there no mention of equal land swaps, but there was no reference to Jerusalem as the capital city of both countries; and finally, repudiation of the reconciliation agreement with Hamas, which was cast as an obstacle to negotiations. In the broader view, Obama also decided not to accept the recommendations of some in the administration, apparently including the Secretary of State, and avoided presenting a more detailed outline of the permanent settlement as the United States sees it. An announcement of that sort would have suited the Palestinians, as the position of the United States in most areas is closer to theirs than to the position of the Netanyahu government. In addition, the Palestinians did not like Obama's rejection of their intention to ask the UN to recognize a Palestinian state in September.

Despite this mixed balance, the Palestinians were cautious in their response to Obama's speeches. It seems that they preferred to leave the stage to the fundamental differences of opinion between Obama and Netanyahu, thereby sharpening the disagreements between the two heads of state. The Palestinians were also anxious to avoid the tendency to couple them with Israel, i.e., insofar as both parties harbored reservations about central points in Obama's speeches. Thus PA figures did not respond to Obama immediately. President Abbas did not comment at all, while officials in more junior positions made very cautious statements, primarily expressing disappointment with Obama's reservations regarding the reconciliation agreement. The result was praise of Obama joined by an attempt to pressure Netanyahu with excerpts from the President's speech, along the lines of "if Netanyahu were to accept these points" it would be possible to renew the negotiations. Hamas, of course, vigorously attacked Obama's speech.

Prime Minister Netanyahu's speeches were received by the Palestinians with many hostile, sharply worded attacks, reflecting their total lack of trust in him. This hostility was also expressed in their refusal to accept the points made by Netanyahu in his address to Congress in which he saw himself as reaching towards them. Among them were his declaration that the eventual borders would leave Jewish settlements on the Palestinian side, a hint to the necessity of evacuating them or leaving them under Palestinian rule; his statement that Israel would be generous in terms of the size of the Palestinian state; and the hint that there could be creative arrangements regarding Jerusalem even though Israel would insist that the city remain united.

From the Palestinians' point of view, these were words without content – and for a number of reasons. First, when Netanyahu declared his acceptance of the two-state solution, this of necessity meant that not all the Jewish settlements could be annexed to Israel because many are located in the heart of areas populated by Palestinians. Second, agreeing to the two-state principle also necessarily means that a large part of the West Bank would come under Palestinian rule, and the Palestinians do not trust Netanyahu's interpretation of the word "generous," given their experience in negotiating with him. Third, Netanyahu's emphasis on an Israeli presence in the Jordan Valley aggravates an already sensitive issue. Fourth, to the Palestinians these positions in any case represent a substantial reduction from their achievements in the negotiations with the Olmert government.

As a result of the deadlock in the negotiations and with all other paths blocked, the Palestinians adopted the strategy of turning to the international community to recognize a Palestinian state in a UN General Assembly resolution in September 2011. The Palestinian leadership is aware of the risks inherent in this strategy, which is liable to turn into a loss for both sides. Chances are that after the resolution passes in the UN, no real change will occur on the ground and Israel will not shift its positions. This will place the Palestinian leadership before a hopeless situation: the Palestinian public will want to know, and rightly so, what good this strategy did. The Palestinian leadership was prepared to abandon this strategy had it been offered a lifeline, i.e., a better alternative. The speeches by Obama and Netanyahu failed to provide that lifeline, and therefore the determination to stick with the September 2011 strategy will likely only intensify.

In light of this situation the Palestinians have no choice but to turn ever more inwards and tend to their internal political situation. This can be accomplished by staying true to the reconciliation agreement with Hamas and closing ranks with the Arab world as a way to prevent the unrest in the Arab world from spilling over into their domain. Indeed, in various references to the Obama and Netanyahu speeches, PA leaders emphasized their commitment to the conciliation agreement and the need for a dialogue with the Arab world about the speeches and their ramifications. Ironically, the speeches by Obama and Netanyahu have only increased the chance that Fatah and Hamas will succeed in implementing their reconciliation agreement.

