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Dueling Speeches and Israeli-American Relations: The Storm before the Calm before the Storm?

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Because two previous confrontations between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Barack Obama had left both a bit bloodied and bowed, it is unlikely that either was seeking a third round during Netanyahu's recent visit to the United States. Yet that is precisely what happened – largely because of a phrase that was both superfluous and misunderstood.

Since the outbreak of the anti-regime protests in Tunisia in late December 2010, and especially after the United States joined a French-led initiative to provide military support to the anti-Qaddafi opposition movement in Libya, Obama has come under growing criticism for pursuing a course that struck many as hesitant, inconsistent, and even contradictory. On May 19, Obama therefore delivered a speech at the State Department, 80 percent of which was devoted to an effort to provide more coherent framing and guidance for US policy on the "Arab spring." This address was described by some as Cairo II – a follow-up to Obama's initiative almost immediately after taking office to engage more positively with the Muslim world. With Netanyahu literally on his way to the United States, Obama found it impossible not to make at least some reference to the principles underlying America's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a neuralgic issue in US-Muslim and especially US-Arab relations. The Palestinian threat to request United Nations recognition of Palestinian statehood at the General Assembly in September gave added urgency to this need. While the United States might well be prepared to oppose this initiative on its own, it would much prefer to preempt it by encouraging the restart of negotiations, or at least to mobilize a "moral majority" of like-minded states, especially in Europe, to stand against the automatic mathematical majority against Israel in the General Assembly.

Consequently, Obama reaffirmed the traditional essentials of American policy, including the commitment to Israeli security and the insistence that any resolution of the conflict could not be imposed but had to be negotiated between the parties. But he also tried to

sharpen some terms of reference for negotiations in the hope that Israeli endorsement of his formulation would persuade some Europeans to vote against the expected draft resolution or, even more ambitiously, persuade the Palestinians to shelve their plan and return to the negotiating table. On the territorial question, the term of reference for negotiation that Obama proposed was: "The borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps."

There is no reason to suspect that, Obama, by invoking 1967, intended to provoke a firestorm of controversy and a clash with Netanyahu. This was a carefully crafted speech that accommodated most Israeli sensitivities: the reference to borders was located in a brief paragraph that stipulated "negotiations" or "negotiated" three times, the point of reference used was "1967 lines" rather than the tendentious and inaccurate term "1967 borders" to which most Israelis are allergic, and the coupling of this point of reference with mutually agreed swaps clearly implied that it was meant to be the starting point of negotiations rather than their outcome. Moreover, Obama could legitimately claim that this formulation was no more than a rephrasing of the US approach to the territorial issue stretching back at least to 1969, when Secretary of State William P. Rogers declared that recognized political boundaries must be established and agreed upon by the parties, but that any change in the preexisting lines "should not reflect the weight of conquest and should be confined to insubstantial alterations required for mutual security."

On the other hand, "1967" has such a highly charged symbolic value in the discourse about the conflict that Obama and his political advisers should have expected headline writers, pundits, and Israeli politicians to simplify and sensationalize his speech and focus on that one phrase to the exclusion of almost everything else – which they did. Moreover, the growth of settlement blocs in the intervening years has created a demographic reality that other US presidents, especially Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, acknowledged explicitly – which Obama did not do. Consequently, Netanyahu, perhaps caught off guard and concerned about a political backlash at home, did not reaffirm his own previous endorsement of a two-state solution or focus his attention on settlement blocs, but instead felt compelled to stress his refusal to do what he had not actually been asked to do: return to the 1967 lines. And Obama then felt compelled, three days later, to remove ambiguity and lower the flames of this controversy by telling the AIPAC Policy Conference that his term of reference had been misreported or misinterpreted and that what he meant was that the parties themselves will negotiate a border that is, by definition, "different than the one existing on June 4, 1967." On the same occasion, he reiterated that no vote at the United Nations would ever create an independent Palestinian state and that the US would continue to stand up against efforts to single Israel out at the UN or in any international forum.

What many breathless analysts described as a crisis in US-Israeli relations therefore turned out to be a tempest in a teapot, extinguished even before Netanyahu arrived at Capitol Hill

on May 24 to address, for the second time in his life, a joint meeting of the Congress. Even before he stepped up to the dais, Netanyahu had already achieved the objective of ensuring that the United States would not stand with those that might vote in the General Assembly in favor of recognizing Palestinian statehood in the West Bank and Gaza, and his rapturous bipartisan reception on Capitol Hill probably serves as warrant against a reversal of American policy on this question.

However, that does not mean that what he said or didn't say in Congress was insignificant. For as he spoke, Obama was setting out on a five-day trip to Europe, where there is much more of what Obama delicately called "impatience" with the peace process and where the Middle East, including the question of what to do at the United Nations in September, would be the topic of intense discussion. It remains to be seen whether the words that Netanyahu used to conquer hearts and minds in Congress will also help Obama conquer hearts and mind in Europe. If they do, it means that Obama will also have achieved his main objective during the Netanyahu's visit. If they do not, the US-Israeli relationship will remain solidly entrenched, but the Obama-Netanyahu relationship may once again be reduced to what is sometimes euphemistically called a "frank and constructive" exchange of views.

