



INSS Insight No. 611, October 1, 2014

**President Obama at the General Assembly:
Sobriety, Continuity, and Renewal
Zaki Shalom**

In his speech to the UN General Assembly on September 24, 2014, President Obama devoted considerable attention to two issues high on the international agenda: the fight against Islamic terrorist organizations, and in particular, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which the President termed “Russian aggression in Europe.” Another topic the President addressed was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but unlike in the past – particularly in his speeches of 2010 and 2011 – this was not a central focus of his remarks. On the face of it, these are all separate issues. However, it is possible to forge a connection between them and draw conclusions about issues with ramifications for the Middle East in general and for Israel in particular.

The President reiterated an approach he took during his first term: that the struggle against Islamic terrorist organizations should not discourage the United States from reaching an historic reconciliation with Islam: “We have reaffirmed again and again that the United States is not and never will be at war with Islam.” Obama asserted that Islam is a peace-loving religion, and the terrorist organizations do not represent “true” Islam. These comments underscore his well known rejection of the idea that there is a clash of civilizations between the West and Islam.

As for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the President reiterated that the status quo in the West Bank and Gaza Strip “is not sustainable.” He also made clear that “as bleak as the landscape appears, America will not give up on the pursuit of peace.” The Middle East and the world, he said, “will be more just and more safe with two states living side by side in peace and security.” However, the President did not offer an assessment on the prospects that this vision would become reality at any time in the future.

The President's comments suggest that the unfortunate state of the peace process is largely a result of the absence of suitable leadership to drive the process. The President was careful not to mention Israel by name as a country lacking such leadership. Yet already several weeks earlier, in an interview with *New York Times* columnist Thomas

Friedman during Operation Protective Edge, the President stated that Prime Minister Netanyahu is too strong politically to be willing to make the necessary concessions toward peace. In his speech to the General Assembly, the President mentioned the "violence engulfing the region" as the main reason that "too many Israelis are ready to abandon the hard work for peace."

An important and even dramatic change reflected in the President's comments was his disengagement from the concept that he and various administration officials had propounded since he entered the White House: that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the source of most, if not all, of US troubles in the Muslim and Arab world: "The situation in Iraq and Syria and Libya," said the President, "should cure anyone of the illusion that the Arab-Israeli conflict is the main source of problems in the region. For far too long, that's been used as an excuse to distract people from problems at home." To be sure, the President ascribed this idea only to leaders in the region and avoided mentioning that his administration as well had enthusiastically embraced this thesis.

This linkage was expressed already in Obama's first presidential election campaign. In an interview on July 27, 2008, Obama held that the United States must adopt an "overarching strategy" in the Middle East, on the assumption that all the region's problems are interconnected. He argued that a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would make it easier for Arab states to support the United States on the issues of Iraq and Afghanistan; that it would weaken Iran; and perhaps would enable the removal of Syria from the Iranian-led axis. Especially clear evidence concerning the importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for US interests was given by General David Petraeus, commander of US Central Command and later head of the Central Intelligence Agency. In testimony before the Senate Armed Forces Committee in March 2010, he reviewed the security challenges facing the United States and asserted that "the enduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbors present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests in the AOR [area of responsibility]."

President Obama's 2014 General Assembly speech was delivered against the backdrop of an impressive "flexing of muscles" in recent weeks. Of foremost importance in this regard is the administration's success in forming a coalition of some forty countries, including Arab and European states, prepared to take part in one way or another in the war effort against ISIS. The President and other administration officials emphasize US determination to fight the terrorist group until it is defeated, with the knowledge that the struggle will be long and comprehensive, and will also require ground operations. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel's clarification that the offensive actions in Syria are not coordinated with the Assad regime, which is supported by Russia, and that the administration is adhering to its position that the Assad regime has lost its legitimacy to rule, has given greater force to the strong superpower image the Obama administration has projected in recent weeks. Thus henceforth it will be difficult to claim that the

administration is “abandoning” its allies in the region, or at the very least, is losing its credibility in their eyes.

As reflected also in the Obama speech, this situation may have far-reaching consequences for the Middle East.

Iran could assess that with US jets bombing areas close to it, the risk of a US attack on its nuclear facilities is more palpable. Indeed, in his speech the President gave the Iranians a soft ultimatum, avowing that the United States will allow Iranian nuclear activity for peaceful purposes only. Obama recommended/threatened that Iran not miss this historic opportunity. Consequently, perhaps the Iranians may indeed become more flexible in their position in the talks with the P5+1. President Rouhani’s interview with Christiane Amanpour, in which he presented Iran as being at the “forefront of fighting against terrorism” and called for continuing the negotiations and avoiding the use of force, threats, and sanctions, despite the disagreements, may indicate a possible softening of Iran’s stance on the nuclear issue.

In the context of Israel, the administration could seek to take advantage of the position of power it has achieved in recent weeks in order to jumpstart the Israeli-Palestinian political process, and more forcefully. In addressing the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the President made it clear that the United States is not prepared to accept the Russian leadership’s worldview that a strong country can arbitrarily set the borders of another state. The United States, said the President, believes that “right makes might” and that people should be allowed to determine their own future. While Russia was the specific context for this remark, it is not inconceivable that Obama had also the situation between Israel and the Palestinians in mind. His comments to the effect that the United States “is, and will be a pacific power ... but we will insist that all nations abide by the rules of the road, and resolve their territorial disputes peacefully, consistent with international law,” invite almost certain conclusions about the administration’s intentions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Despite the Obama administration’s longstanding frustration regarding the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, it will likely seek in the coming months to restart the talks between the sides. The Palestinian Authority’s stepped-up activity in international institutions to promote recognition of the Palestinian state, as reflected in Mahmoud Abbas’ speech to the General Assembly, could be used by the administration as an important lever to pressure Israel to soften its positions in the negotiations. At the same time, the administration’s disillusionment with the idea that the conflict has comprehensive consequences could indicate that it will adopt more attainable targets in the context of the conflict and will not necessarily adhere to the objective of reaching a comprehensive settlement.