

Obama's Focus at the UN: Getting Passionate about Israel

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Brief Analysis

On the emotive issue of the Palestinian request for UN admission as a state, Obama delivered one of the most impassioned statements in support of Israel ever made by an American president in the well of the General Assembly.

President Obama's speech at the United Nations yesterday may have lacked both the thematic power of his other major speeches on the world stage -- "the pursuit of peace in an imperfect world" is not likely to capture imaginations -- as well as new, bold ideas to address Iran's push for nuclear weapons or the deepening humanitarian crisis in Syria. But on the emotive issue of the Palestinian request for UN admission as a state, Obama delivered one of the most impassioned statements in support of Israel ever made by an American president in the well of the General Assembly.

It was no surprise that Obama devoted considerable text to explaining his opposition to UN membership for Palestine, which -- as he noted -- appears to contradict his oft-stated support for the establishment of a Palestinian state. And it was no surprise that Obama made a "process" argument, defending his position on the grounds that a Palestinian state can only truly emerge from a negotiation with Israel, rather than a "substance" argument, which might have noted the attributes of statehood that "Palestine" lacks (control over territory, for example) or the fact that the Palestinian Authority had, in the Oslo Accords, promised not to pursue these very sorts of international stratagems to circumvent negotiations.

What was surprising is that Obama went far beyond just making a case for negotiations as the only way to resolve the conflict. Rather, like an embattled attorney representing an unpopular client before a skeptical jury, Obama's speech to the assembled leaders from more than 190 countries was essentially a call for people around the world to put themselves in the shoes of Israel and, most notably, the Jewish people. As he said:

Let us be honest with ourselves: Israel is surrounded by neighbors that have waged repeated wars against it. Israel's citizens have been killed by rockets fired at their houses and suicide bombs on their buses. Israel's children come of age knowing that throughout the region, other children are taught to hate them. Israel, a small country of less than

eight million people, looks out at a world where leaders of much larger nations threaten to wipe it off of the map. The Jewish people carry the burden of centuries of exile and persecution, and fresh memories of knowing that six million people were killed simply because of who they are. Those are facts. They cannot be denied.

The Jewish people have forged a successful state in their historic homeland. Israel deserves recognition. It deserves normal relations with its neighbors. And friends of the Palestinians do them no favors by ignoring this truth, just as friends of Israel must recognize the need to pursue a two-state solution with a secure Israel next to an independent Palestine.

Perhaps most remarkably, Obama did not pair that recitation of a fundamentally pro-Israel narrative with an equal but opposite recitation of the Palestinian narrative -- the themes of rootlessness, humiliation, and dispossession that he has cited on previous occasions. (In last year's UN address, for example, he said: "This time, we will think not of ourselves, but of the young girl in Gaza who wants to have no ceiling on her dreams, or the young boy in Sderot who wants to sleep without the nightmare of rocket fire.") Instead, with no discussion of Israeli settlement activity, building in Jerusalem, or the difficulties of Palestinian movement through checkpoints, Obama limited himself to one side of the story. In essence, the punishment meted out to Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas for rejecting Washington's request to shelve his UN gambit was that Obama came to New York as Israel's ally, not as an impartial mediator of peace diplomacy.

Obama's statement was not, one should point out, the unvarnished, chapter-and-verse recitation of Israel-friendly policy views on substantive issues. He could have noted that only one of the two parties -- the Palestinians -- has refused to negotiate since last September. He might have specifically underscored the reality of a divided Palestine, in which a sizable part of the state seeking UN recognition is under the control of a terrorist movement committed to Israel's (and the Palestinian Authority's) destruction. He did not take the opportunity to clarify certain aspects of his parameters for peacemaking that he sidestepped in his May remarks, such as the eminently logical principle that Palestinian refugees will return to Palestine, not Israel, or the urgency of an agreement that ends the conflict and terminates all claims once and for all. He could have scolded many in the room, especially Arab states and their all-talk-but-no-action approach to the Palestinian state-building project. And he should have called specifically on rulers and peoples in countries that already have treaties with Israel (i.e., Egypt and Jordan) to strengthen the regional environment for peace by defending their strategic choice for peace, rather than letting it be the preferred pinata for discontent over domestic issues.

Still, those deficiencies only marginally detract from the declaratory power of his speech. Many factors may have motivated the president to make his passionate statement opposing Palestinian UN recognition, but whether it was born of high policy, moral conviction, or crass politics, it will be compared in the annals of America's lonely defense of Israel at the United Nations alongside Daniel Patrick Moynihan's castigation of the Zionism-is-Racism resolution during the Ford administration, and John Negroponte's declaration during the George W. Bush administration that the United States would veto any Security Council resolution on the Middle East conflict that failed to condemn terrorism against Israel.

Beyond the peace process, the more substantial critiques of the president's speech concern the following:

- On Iran, the president could spare just one bland sentence; he passed on the opportunity of linking Iran's atrocious human rights record with the equally atrocious repression of Iran's only Arab ally, Syria; and he offered no specific suggestion on ways to impose what he called "greater pressure and isolation" on their nuclear program. The rhetorical sidelining of the multifaceted challenge posed by Iran was the most disappointing -- and worrying -- aspect of the speech.
- On Syria, the president talked of the need for rhetorical measures -- "we must speak with one voice... [and] stand

with the Syrian people" -- but he offered no glimpse of U.S. commitment to take practical measures to protect innocent Syrians from the brutality of their government, such as the creation of internationally protected humanitarian zones on Syria's borders or the formation of a formal contact group to engage with the Syrian opposition.

- On support for Arab transitions to democracy, Obama confirmed that America's cupboard is bare and there is little to spare. Whereas he spoke in May 2011 of supporting Egypt and Tunisia with "trade, not just aid," there was no mention of aid at all in yesterday's remarks, just "greater trade and investment."
- As is now customary in the president's speeches on the Middle East, he boldly affirmed America's commitment to a range of "universal rights" (about women, religious tolerance, etc.) but never mentioned a country in which these rights are routinely and legally denied -- Washington's premier Arab ally, Saudi Arabia.
- And in the a-bit-too-much category, the president could not restrain himself from three specific references to Usama bin Laden, as if the assembled gathering needed multiple reminders that he was the commander-in-chief who ordered the raid on the compound in Abbottabad.

Taken together, the president's words on the broader Middle East lacked both the power and the import of his passionate statement on behalf of Israel. That is almost surely the way he planned it.

Robert Satloff is executive director of the Washington Institute. ❖

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