



## Obama and Netanyahu: Divergence and Convergence

By David Makovsky

President Barack Obama recently delivered two speeches relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The first speech, delivered on May 19, 2011, discussed the issue as part of an overall Middle East policy assessment largely focused on the Arab Spring. The second one, delivered three days later to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), centered on the Middle East peace process. Then, on May 24, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu addressed a joint session of Congress. Much controversy has surrounded these three speeches—despite pronounced differences between Obama’s and Netanyahu’s messages, commonalities were apparent. These points of agreement and divergence merit further analysis.

### Where They Agree

1. *Palestinian issues should not be decided at the UN; statehood cannot be imposed, it must be negotiated.*

The United Nations should not become the forum for declaring Palestinian statehood, as statehood cannot be achieved without peacemaking. As such, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations are the vital vehicle for pursuing peacemaking between the parties. Obama’s two speeches clearly suggest that his administration would veto a unilateral bid for statehood at the UN Security Council, which the Palestinians may bring to the floor this September. On May 19, Obama declared, “For the Palestinians, efforts to delegitimize Israel will end in failure. Symbolic actions to isolate Israel at the United Nations in September won’t create an independent state. And we will stand against attempts to single it out for criticism in international forums.” Netanyahu concurred in his May 24 speech: “Peace can only be achieved around the negotiating table. The Palestinian attempt to impose a settlement through the United Nations will not bring peace. It should be forcefully opposed by all those who want to see this conflict end.”

The timing of Obama’s speeches (immediately preceding the G-8 summit in France) indicates that he will seek to avert European support for a Palestinian statehood declaration by the UN in his private bilateral meetings with European leaders. Indeed, the United States, Israel, and the Palestinians all view Europe as the prime political battlefield for a September vote. In the months running up to the president’s speeches, tension emerged between the United States and the EU in the forum known as the Quartet (which also includes Russia and the UN) when European officials signaled their interest in

supporting UN action in the absence of an American plan. Yet the May 27 G-8 communique declared “strong support for the vision of Israeli-Palestinian peace outlined by President Obama” (although with no mention of his specific “1967 lines plus land swaps” parameters; Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper raised the question, and a U.S. official said Obama concurred that it should be left without specifics). Such statements suggest that Obama has a chance of enlisting European support for avoiding a UN vote in September. Yet there are indications that some European officials want to link their support for backing off from the September vote to Israeli and Palestinian support of Obama’s vision as the basis for renewed direct negotiations.

- 2. *No negotiating with Hamas.*** Israel cannot negotiate with Hamas, because the group is sworn to the country’s destruction. In one of the few major substantive changes between the two speeches, Obama declared on May 22, “The recent agreement between Fatah and Hamas poses an enormous obstacle to peace. No country can be expected to negotiate with a terrorist organization sworn to its destruction. And we will continue to demand that Hamas accept the basic responsibilities of peace, including recognizing Israel’s right to exist and rejecting violence and adhering to all existing agreements.” He added, “We know that peace demands a partner—which is why I said that Israel cannot be expected to negotiate with Palestinians who do not recognize its right to exist. And we will hold the Palestinians accountable for their actions and for their rhetoric.”

Clearly, then, Obama does not accept the standard Palestinian position that Israel should accept negotiations with Mahmoud Abbas premised on his position as head of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and not as head of the PA. The two speeches also suggest that Obama believes the onus is on the Palestinians to prove that Hamas is not formally part of a new Palestinian government of technocrats, and that this government adheres to the Quartet’s principles.

For his part, Netanyahu was unequivocal when it came to Hamas, stating in his May 24 speech, “I say to President Abbas: Tear up your pact with Hamas, sit down and negotiate, make peace with the Jewish state. And if you do, I promise you this: Israel will not be the last country to welcome a Palestinian state as the new member of the United Nations. It will be the first to do so.”

- 3. *No return to the pre-1967 lines.*** In both the May 19 and May 22 speeches, Obama stated, “The borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps so that secure and recognized borders are established for both states.” Amid allegations of mischaracterizing Obama’s position on return to the pre-1967 lines, Netanyahu acknowledged in his speech to Congress that he and Obama agree there is no return to the pre-1967 boundary between Israel and the West Bank: “As President Obama said, the border will be different than the one that existed on June 4, 1967. Israel will not return to the indefensible lines of 1967.” Both leaders cited “demographic” realities that will have to be taken into account as the border is delineated, Obama referring twice to “demographic realities,” and Netanyahu describing, two days later in his speech to Congress “dramatic demographic changes.” Of course, the phrase “demographic” changes or realities is simply diplomatic code for annexation to Israel of settlement blocs.
- 4. *Two states for two peoples.*** Each leader stated that a resolution to the conflict requires “two states for two peoples”: Palestinian leaders must officially acknowledge Israel’s character as a Jewish state and homeland of the Jewish people, and Israel must remain both democratic and Jewish. On May 19, Obama declared: “What America and the international community can do is to state frankly what everyone knows: a lasting peace will involve two states for two peoples—Israel as a Jewish state and the

homeland for the Jewish people and the state of Palestine as the homeland for the Palestinian people, each state enjoying self-determination, mutual recognition, and peace.” For his part, Netanyahu told Congress:

The Palestinians share this small land with us. We seek a peace in which they’ll be neither Israel’s subjects nor its citizens. They should enjoy a national life of dignity as a free, viable, and independent people living in their own state...President Abbas must do what I have done. I stood before my people—and I told you, it wasn’t easy for me—I stood before my people and I said, “I will accept a Palestinian state.” It’s time for President Abbas to stand before his people and say, “I will accept a Jewish state.” Those six words will change history. They’ll make it clear to the Palestinians that this conflict must come to an end; that they’re not building a Palestinian state to continue the conflict with Israel, but to end it. And those six words will convince the people of Israel that they have a true partner for peace.

5. ***Do not negotiate Jerusalem now.*** Ideally, the parties could resolve all of the core issues now and avoid two-phased negotiations. That approach seems impossible at the moment, however—in particular, the parties should avoid immediate negotiations about Jerusalem because the issue is not ripe for resolution. On May 19, Obama stated, “Palestinians should know the territorial outlines of their state; Israelis should know that their basic security concerns will be met. I’m aware that these steps alone will not resolve the conflict, because two wrenching and emotional issues will remain: the future of Jerusalem and the fate of Palestinian refugees.” It should be pointed out that although Netanyahu did not explicitly support this idea during his visit, he certainly raised no objection to it. In general, he has demonstrated no appetite for launching negotiations regarding Jerusalem and has said publicly that the prospects for impasse on the issue are high.
6. ***A nonmilitarized Palestinian state and other security criteria.*** Both leaders have made clear that the Palestinian state should be nonmilitarized. Obama used that formulation on May 19, adding, “Provisions must also be robust enough to prevent a resurgence of terrorism, to stop the infiltration of weapons, and to provide effective border security. This sets down key parameters for negotiations.” He also emphasized performance-based transitions, stating that “the effectiveness of security arrangements must be demonstrated.”
7. ***Israel’s right to defend itself.*** On May 19, Obama declared, “As for security, every state has the right to self-defense, and Israel must be able to defend itself—by itself—against any threat.” His wording was clearly a swipe at the UN’s 2009 Goldstone report, which brought into question Israel’s right to address constant rocket attacks from Gaza.
8. ***The Arab Spring is welcome, but it could complicate peacemaking.*** Both Obama and Netanyahu have expressed hope that the Arab Spring succeeds. Yet in the same breath, they have acknowledged that the ongoing regional upheaval could make Arab-Israeli peacemaking more difficult.

## Where They Disagree

1. ***Israeli territory must be exchanged for settlement blocs.*** Obama believes that in order for Israel to annex the most populous Jewish settlement blocs adjacent to and beyond the pre-1967 lines, it must negotiate land swaps that give the Palestinians territory from the Israeli side of those lines. The timeline of the two leaders’ ongoing friction regarding this point is clear. During his May 19 speech, Obama

stated, “The borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps, so that secure and recognized borders are established for both states.” Netanyahu immediately rebuffed this point before leaving for the United States, insinuating that Obama wanted Israel to return to the pre-1967 lines and not mentioning the president’s call for swaps. The next day, the leaders met in the Oval Office alone for two hours, after which Netanyahu repeated to the media, in Obama’s presence, that a return to the 1967 lines was unacceptable and that such a border would be indefensible.

Obama sought to clarify the matter in his May 22 speech. Because Obama knows that Netanyahu is knowledgeable about the oft-used “swap” terminology, he believes that the Israeli leader deliberately mischaracterized him at least twice. Alluding to this problem on May 22, Obama reiterated verbatim what he said on May 19, and then added:

And since my position has been misrepresented several times, let me reaffirm what “1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps” means. By definition, it means that the parties themselves—Israelis and Palestinians—will negotiate a border that is different than the one that existed on June 4, 1967. That’s what mutually agreed-upon swaps means. It is a well-known formula to all who have worked on this issue for a generation. It allows the parties themselves to account for the changes that have taken place over the last forty-four years. It allows the parties themselves to take account of those changes, including the new demographic realities on the ground, and the needs of both sides.

Yet, in his May 24 address, the prime minister stated that he and Obama were in agreement about there being no return to the pre-1967 lines. Why Netanyahu chose to take this approach remains a key question. Senior Israelis say Netanyahu felt personally stung that he was not adequately consulted on Obama’s planned policy statements on definition of borders and other issues related to Israeli security, as he complained to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during a phone conversation on May 19. The Israeli government, in fact, had been informed of key contents the day before, and there was rampant press speculation—especially in Israel—that the 1967-plus-swaps phrasing would be in the speech. Yet aides to Netanyahu insist they were unaware.

It is understandable that Netanyahu would be piqued that Obama gave a potentially controversial speech on the very day before their Oval Office meeting. While it is true that Obama wanted to deliver this key speech before he left for Europe, allowing an interval of a few days between the speech and his meeting with Netanyahu would have been more politic. It has been argued that the U.S. president would not be likely to deliver a major address relating to Taiwan on the eve of a visit by the premier of the People’s Republic of China.

U.S. officials say they informed Israel last September and subsequently that failure to extend the settlement freeze could force Washington to come forward with a position on the 1967 lines plus swaps, since the settlement issue is related to the issue of borders. Moreover, they say that the need to restructure final-status talks is something Israel should welcome, since it would facilitate progress while bypassing the issue of Jerusalem. A senior official said that, clearly, the United States would welcome it if the parties want to solve all their problems at once.

Currently, the question is whether mischaracterization will lead to lingering bad blood between the two leaders and further impair a relationship that is already strained. Furthermore, Obama’s Republican opponents, including presidential contenders Mitt Romney and Tim Pawlenty, have seized upon Netanyahu’s rebuffs, increasing the likelihood that false depictions of the president’s stance will be used against him in his reelection bid next year.

Two other points merit notice. First, amid all the hoopla, Netanyahu did not publicly mention his own view on land swaps, leading some to wonder whether his focus on 1967 was intended to deflect attention away from the swap idea. The prime minister has never publicly embraced swaps. Haaretz and Ynet both cited a February 2009 WikiLeaks-released U.S. diplomatic cable (Ynet runs a photo) of a conversation between Netanyahu and an American delegation led by Senator Ben Cardin two weeks after Netanyahu's election as premier where Netanyahu reportedly expressed support for the concept of land swaps and emphasized that he did not want to govern the West Bank and Gaza. Upon publication of these cables, Netanyahu's office clarified that Netanyahu meant to demonstrate Israel's "willingness for territorial compromise," and that "any other interpretation isn't correct."

Second, although Obama may have been consistent about the issue in his two speeches, he made the mistake of not adequately explaining what he meant by swaps—namely, that Israel could retain settlement blocs adjacent to the pre-1967 boundary, where a large majority of Israeli settlers live, in return for granting the Palestinians offsetting parcels of empty land from Israel's side of that boundary. His reasons for not stating this definition are unclear. One could speculate that the speech focused primarily on the Arab Spring, and that Obama perhaps believed his wider message would be diluted if he dwelled on precise definitions. Yet he did not give a full definition in his AIPAC speech either, suggesting that he did not want to delve too deeply into the question of how many settlement blocs Israel would retain. None of this necessarily justifies Netanyahu's reaction (given that he knows exactly what is meant by swaps), but defining the term would have minimized the furor over this issue.

In substantive terms, Obama clearly does not regard the idea of land swaps as highly controversial, given that it was part of the Camp David II negotiations led by current Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak in 2000. More recently, former prime minister Ehud Olmert favored the idea of "land swaps of equal size"—a phrase that, it should be noted, Obama did not use.

Nor is supporting land swaps a major deviation from previous U.S. policy. Ever since William Rogers was appointed secretary of state in 1969, U.S. policy has supported a return to the pre-1967 lines with relatively minor alterations. Bill Clinton supported land swaps during his diplomatic push in 2000. This idea was put forward by George W. Bush in 2005, who stated in 2008, "I believe that any peace agreement between them will require mutually agreed adjustments to the armistice lines of 1949 to reflect current realities and to ensure that the Palestinian state is viable and contiguous." The lines Bush referred to are virtually identical to the 1967 lines, although they do not include twenty-six kilometers of No Man's Land incorporated into Israel between 1949 and 1967.

Little noticed is that Netanyahu accepted the idea of annexing only settlement blocs. In a speech to the Knesset before his arrival in Washington, Netanyahu declared that he would be "guided" by the Israeli "consensus" on potential annexations, explicitly mentioning "settlement blocs," which are known to be equivalent to no more than ten percent of the West Bank. This is a significant concession for the prime minister's Likud Party, which in the past has favored yielding only noncontiguous cantons to the Palestinians (though Labor Party leaders such as Yitzhak Rabin have accepted such concessions since the 1992–1995 period). In his speech to Congress, Netanyahu alluded to those blocs, but then said "Other places of critical strategic and national importance will be incorporated into the final borders of Israel."

- 2. Deferring the refugee issue as the price for deferring Jerusalem.* Left implicit in Obama's speech is that the price for deferring the Jerusalem question and creating de-facto two-phased negotiations on the core issues identified in the original 1993 Oslo Accords (land, security, Jerusalem, and refugees) is a comparable delay in the Palestinian refugee issue. Indeed, both are narrative issues that cut to the parties' self-definition, involving questions of identity, religion, and nationalism. Neither Abbas nor Netanyahu



has prepared their publics for any compromises on these issues. One can imagine the Palestinians will object to deferring only on the Jerusalem issue, because it would give Israel no incentive for a second phase of negotiations, since any compromise on Jerusalem would, of course, be wrenching. Senior Palestinians are well aware that the U.S. and European positions on refugees are closer to that of Israel than to that of the Palestinians. Therefore, if they are going to be asked to make an ultimate concession on refugees, they would like it as a tradeoff in return for some Israeli compromise on Jerusalem. This does not mean that the United States now has an explicit policy on Jerusalem, but the peace parameters discussed by Barak and Yasser Arafat at the end of the Clinton administration in 2000 and by Olmert and Abbas at the end of the Bush administration in 2008 both involved compromises over the city's future. The Obama administration is also concerned that advancing the refugee issue prematurely—which would require resettling Palestinian refugees in Palestine and not in Israel—could hand Hamas a political windfall against President Abbas and his allies in a Palestinian election year.

Netanyahu objects to Obama's approach, however, insisting that the United States reaffirm President Bush's 2004 letter, which stated: "It seems clear that an agreed, just, fair, and realistic framework for a solution to the Palestinian refugee issue as part of any final-status agreement will need to be found through the establishment of a Palestinian state, and the settling of Palestinian refugees there, rather than in Israel." Netanyahu views Obama's speech as a step back from the Bush letter, even though Obama has never alluded to support of any kind for allowing Palestinian refugees into Israel while repeatedly supporting the idea of Israel as a Jewish state. Of course, Netanyahu, like Israelis across the entire political spectrum, view the idea of any major return of refugees as undermining the prospects of a Jewish majority in Israel. It raises profound security, demographic, and other concerns. In his speech before Congress, Netanyahu declared, "Palestinians from around the world should have a right to immigrate, if they so choose, to a Palestinian state. And here is what this means. It means that the Palestinian refugee problem will be resolved outside the borders of Israel. You know, everybody knows this. It's time to say it. It's important."

As for Jerusalem, although Netanyahu stated that he knows the issue will come up in negotiations, he did not agree that the parties will necessarily divide the city. At the same time, his Congressional speech revealed a rare understanding of the city's importance to Palestinians: "I know this is a difficult issue for Palestinians, but I believe that with creativity and with goodwill a solution can be found."

3. *Duration of transition for security arrangements.* The time span of the Israeli security presence along the Jordan River remains under question as well. In his Congressional speech, Netanyahu declared, "It's vital, absolutely vital, that Israel maintain a long-term military presence along the Jordan River. Solid security arrangements on the ground are necessary not only to protect the peace. They're necessary to protect Israel in case the peace unravels. Because in our unstable region, no one can guarantee that our peace partners today will be there tomorrow." Yet Obama stated, "The duration of this transition period must be agreed." This means that outside parties would not dictate the terms of transition to either Israel or the Palestinians.

Finally, a departure from past U.S. policy was apparent in Obama's statement that "the full and phased withdrawal of Israeli military forces should be coordinated with the assumption of Palestinian security responsibility in a sovereign, nonmilitarized state." Specifically, the idea that Israeli military personnel would at some point have to fully withdraw from the West Bank could be interpreted by some to mean that Israel will be unable to retain three listening posts there indefinitely, which was assumed during the 2000 Camp David negotiations. Yet this allegation has been disputed by some informed sources who assert that the withdrawal of military personnel does not preclude the presence of Israeli nonmilitary personnel, including civilian technicians.

- 4. *Whether or not the Arab Spring makes peace more urgent.*** Although both Obama and Netanyahu say they welcome an Arab Spring that leads to democracy while fearing the negative populist impulses it could generate, there is a clear difference between the two. Because Netanyahu fears that Islamists will hijack the Arab Spring, he hinted that Israel might be better served by a wait-and-see approach. In contrast, Obama believes that the Arab Spring makes the issue of Israeli withdrawal more urgent, before Arab populism exacerbates matters. Since the duration of the movement and its aftermath is unknown, such a wait-and-see approach would be unwise, since it could be tantamount to shelving the Israeli-Palestinian issue indefinitely.
- 5. *Impact of delay in resolving the conflict.*** Obama and Netanyahu seem to have a conceptual difference—at least as articulated publicly—regarding the role of time in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One of the key points Obama elaborates upon most in his May 22 speech is that time is not on Israel’s side for a variety of reasons. In his view, those who care about the future of Israel’s Jewish and democratic character should realize that long-term delays could hurt the country due to challenges relating to demography, international isolation, growing radicalization, technological reach of nonstate actors, and new populism in the Arab world. The only way to prevent this is to establish a Palestinian state, thereby avoiding the deterioration of Israel’s position in the region. As the president put it:

I said to Prime Minister Netanyahu, I believe that the current situation in the Middle East does not allow for procrastination. I also believe that real friends talk openly and honestly with one another. So I want to share with you some of what I said to the prime minister. Here are the facts we all must confront. First, the number of Palestinians living west of the Jordan River is growing rapidly and fundamentally reshaping the demographic realities of both Israel and the Palestinian Territories. This will make it harder and harder—without a peace deal—to maintain Israel as both a Jewish state and a democratic state. Second, technology will make it harder for Israel to defend itself in the absence of a genuine peace. Third, a new generation of Arabs is reshaping the region. A just and lasting peace can no longer be forged with one or two Arab leaders. Going forward, millions of Arab citizens have to see that peace is possible for that peace to be sustained. And just as the context has changed in the Middle East, so too has it been changing in the international community over the last several years. There’s a reason why the Palestinians are pursuing their interests at the United Nations. They recognize that there is impatience with the peace process, or the absence of one, not just in the Arab World—in Latin America, in Asia, and in Europe. And that impatience is growing, and it’s already manifesting itself in capitals around the world. And those are the facts...

We can’t afford to wait another decade, or another two decades, or another three decades to achieve peace. The world is moving too fast. The extraordinary challenges facing Israel will only grow. Delay will undermine Israel’s security and the peace that the Israeli people deserve.

According to Israeli officials, Netanyahu has conceded that time is not on Israel’s side when discussing the issue in certain private settings. Yet he clearly fears that saying this in public would create self-imposed pressure on Israel.

## Areas of Uncertainty

- 1. *Whether or not there is a quid pro quo on territory in return for mutual recognition.*** Obama’s speeches juxtaposed the issues of territory, security, and mutual recognition, claiming that the issues of Jerusalem and refugees need to be resolved later. As the president declared on May 19, “What America and the international community can do is to state frankly what everyone knows—a lasting peace will involve two states for two peoples: Israel as a Jewish state and the homeland for the Jewish people, and the state

of Palestine as the homeland for the Palestinian people, each state enjoying self-determination, mutual recognition, and peace.”

On one hand, Obama seemed to be calling on the world and not on the Palestinians per se to recognize Israel’s Jewish character, yet at the same time he mentioned the idea of “mutual recognition.” The question is whether a Palestinian recognition of Israel’s Jewish character would convince Israel to yield territory. If the Palestinians do not cross this historic threshold, will Israelis be willing to cross their own threshold and reach a territorial deal? Obama did not state the matter explicitly as a quid pro quo, so the issue needs to be clarified. If there is no clear quid pro quo, it raises concern that Israel is being asked to make preemptive concessions on territory that could undermine its leverage.

**2. *Defining the Palestinian power-sharing government.*** A subtle difference has emerged between Obama and Netanyahu regarding a potential Palestinian power-sharing agreement. Both leaders believe that active Hamas ministerial participation in such a unity government would disqualify the PA as an interlocutor for peace. Abbas has indicated to diplomats that he favors any new government that accepts the Quartet principles, and he has asserted that security cooperation with Israel will not change. And Hamas official Mousa Abu Marzouk has stated publicly that the security status quo would continue as is until next year’s election. This means that Hamas would continue to control Gaza while the PA—which has worked closely with Israeli security—would continue to control the West Bank. When these factors are taken together, it seems the United States will judge the new government by its principles and actions. This might explain why Obama does not see tension between repeatedly agreeing that Israel not sit with Hamas and his belief that time is not on Israel’s side. The Israeli position also needs to be clarified as well, under such circumstances. Yet, as if to underscore Israeli skepticism, it is worth noting that Netanyahu national security advisor Yaakov Amidror told the Israeli media that at such a point, Abbas would be the equivalent of a lawyer to the mafia.

### **A Way Forward?**

Presidential foreign policy initiatives often include details regarding how the secretary of state or other envoy will be dispatched to implement the plan in question. Yet this is not the case here, perhaps due to the lack of clarity about what the coming months hold—namely, the unknown composition of the Fatah-Hamas power-sharing government, which, as Obama stated, must be clarified by the Palestinians themselves. It might also be due to Washington’s awaiting of European reaction to the president’s efforts against UN intervention in September. Indeed, the United States may not settle on a strategy until both of these issues are in focus.

Yet some have questioned whether Washington really wants to renew talks between Israelis and Palestinians at all, suggesting serious doubts about the ability of Abbas or Netanyahu to do what is needed for peace. In such a context, Obama may want to set out markers for peace in an effort to stop the slide to September, but he is not looking to set himself up for failure by going any further. For example, leading Israeli columnist Nahum Barnea wondered whether the president’s failure to name a new envoy is a hint that he is tired of both parties and would be happy to consign the issue to “benign neglect” until after he is re-elected next year. As Barnea pointed out, however, the current turbulence in the Middle East suggests that neglect could lead to bloodshed, since the region tends to abhor a vacuum.

There are indications that the Europeans are waiting to see if Netanyahu and Abbas are willing to sign up to Obama’s speech as the basis for negotiations before making their decision about September. Yet, it is interesting that Obama did not use the phrase “terms of reference” in his speeches—in other words, he did not insist that the parties accept his terms as the only basis for renewed negotiations. Perhaps he realized that Netanyahu is highly unlikely to accept “the pre-1967 lines plus swaps” as a basis for entering talks and



that Abbas is equally unlikely to accept the precondition of accepting Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people. In any case, the fact that Fatah and Hamas have yet to form a new power-sharing government has raised speculation on whether the United States will in fact seek to renew negotiations between Netanyahu and Abbas at the moment.

For Israel, the advantage of renewing negotiations now might be to entirely avert a Hamas-Fatah power-sharing government. It may also be useful to avert the further isolation that both Obama and Netanyahu have discussed in different contexts. Without talks, Netanyahu returns to Jerusalem from Washington without putting forward any strategy on how to stop the slide in Israel's isolation around the world. So far, Abbas's position is that any talks with Israel must be based on the 1967 lines with land swaps and must include a settlement freeze. Yet if the PA fails to adhere to Obama's request to further peace talks, Washington could construe it as a slap in the face—especially following two major presidential speeches that were hardly adversarial to Palestinian concerns. Although Abbas committed to Obama's request for a year of negotiations with Israel, in practice he negotiated with Israel for only two weeks—namely, the first two weeks of September 2010. The Obama administration seems within its rights to ask that a bilateral negotiation take its full, scheduled course. It is unlikely that the Obama administration will seek only the resumption of talks, in order to avoid the repeat of last September when talks were launched only to be suspended within weeks. To avoid a future embarrassment, the parties should be ready to engage in serious talks under Obama's banner of "two states for two peoples," and there needs to be a sense of how those talks would unfold. Yet Washington has not had a senior official in the region for a meeting with Netanyahu and Abbas since December, so without serious probing, it is difficult to draw conclusions about how the parties will act at the table.

Obama's speeches bring the European reaction into focus as well. Will they publicly prod Abbas to return to negotiations with Israel? And will a senior European personality (e.g., EU foreign policy chief Lady Catherine Ashton) establish the European corollary to Obama's speeches and deliver some tough truths, just as Obama spelled out for Americans his view on territory and the role of time in the conflict? Given Europe's closeness to the Palestinians, certainly no less than the U.S. relationship to Israel, an EU speech about coming to grips with Israel's security concerns and the concept of "two states for two peoples" would suggest the extent to which Obama's remarks echoed around the world.

## POLICY NOTES

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