

## *COMMENTARY*

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### **Obama's Speech at AIPAC**

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Researchers and experts on the American Middle East policy, find it quite difficult these days to explain the current policy of President Obama and his administration towards the Israeli- Palestinian peace process. As we all recall, President Obama began his term in the White House with a clear-cut conviction: the Israeli- Palestinian peace process would be one of the top United States priorities, and his administration will devote intensive efforts in order to bring about its resolution.

President Obama and his top officials, including the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton made it quite clear that they view the Israeli Palestinian conflict as the number one cause for instability in the Middle East and the difficulties of the United States to bring the Arab states closer to her. Once this conflict is solved the United States would find it much easier to cope with the Iranian threat and the war against radical Islamist groups in Afghanistan. It is in this context that we should examine Obama's decision to convey his friendly message to the Arab world in a dramatic speech he delivered in Cairo in June 2009.

In this speech President Obama made it clear that he was determined to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He went even further and demanded that Israel should stop all acts of settlement within the west bank. This demand was received with harsh criticism by the right wing government of Israel headed by Netanyahu. However, President Obama made it clear he would not let Israeli opposition to stop or even slow his endeavours in this regard.

Over two years since that day, we see a dramatic change in Obama's attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in general, and his attitude towards Israeli, in particular. The Palestinian issue is no longer on the top priorities of this administration. It is superseded by the threat the Iranians pose with their nuclear ambitions to international community in general and to Israel, in particular. The Obama administration hardly finds time to make any comment regarding the intensive settlement efforts Israelis are carrying on in the West Bank.

Does this change reflect a strategic transformation in Obama's thinking with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Has he concluded that this conflict cannot be resolved in our generation, and that the intensive US involvement in its resolution was a grave mistake from the very beginning or maybe this change just reflects President Obama's fear of the Jewish community in the United States in this election year? If this is true, then the change is just a tactical one. President Obama is the same person and his views are similar to those he tried to implement two years ago. We believe that president Obama's speech at America Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) on 4 March 2012 might give us with some answers to these questions.

### **The speech at AIPAC**

**O**n 4 March 2012, President Obama delivered a speech to AIPAC– the Jewish-American lobby organization which works with government elements in the US for the purpose of intensifying Israel's strength and enhancing bilateral US-Israel relations. Delegates at the conference received the President's speech with great enthusiasm. For years AIPAC has been considered a highly powerful force among American administrations. The willingness of the President and other key figures in the administration to appear each year before this forum is an obvious indication of its increasing power. However, in many circles, there is a tendency to occasionally ascribe to the organization's exaggerated abilities, regarding its influence on the foreign policy decision-making of the administration. As an example, there is a prevalent claim that it was the Israeli lobby that pushed the Bush administration to attack Iraq during the Gulf War in order to remove the Iraqi threat over Israel.

In this article we will seek to examine both the overt and hinted aspects of the President's speech, mainly in the Iranian and Israel-Palestinian context. Some aspects were intended to make it clear to Israel and its leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, that although the tensions between the two states seem to have faded away, and there are no deep open controversies, the positions of the administration and of Israel on key issues on the agenda do not complement each other.

### **The bilateral ties**

**I**n his speech the President emphasized the leading components of the special relationship between Israel and the US – shared human and moral values, freedom, democracy, cross-party commitment to Israel. He also emphasized the American commitment to Israel and the tightening of security relations, which have led to unprecedentedly close relations between the two countries. This was mainly reflected in the military-intelligence sphere and in joint military

exercises. Despite budget difficulties, the President stressed, assistance to Israel has grown each year. The US assists Israel in developing advanced technologies and supplies it with weapons given only to the closest allies. "Israel", he concluded, "must be able to defend itself, by itself, against any threat."

Apart from the military sphere, the US has extended broad political support to Israel during this President's term. In this regard, the President called attention to American actions against the Goldstone Report and the forestalling of anti-Israel criticism following the Marmara incident, at the Durban Conference, and in the Human Rights Council. The message suggested by the current state of affairs, as presented by the President, is that Israel has a true friend in Washington. It has someone to rely on. This is an administration with a proven track record of support for Israel rather than only empty declarations.

Although this has not been said openly, these statements seem to suggest that on the Iranian issue too Israel can rely on an administration that has already proven its determination to fulfil its commitments to Israel; therefore Israel must not choose to embark on an independent path of action. Such a path might be taken only in the event Israel judges that the American administration is not prepared to take responsibility to act militarily against Iran. As regards the Obama administration and its relations with Israel – it has no reason for these sorts of fears.

Furthermore, in a thorough examination of the President's statements, one cannot escape the impression that the state of affairs presented by the President was intended to portray Israel as a 'needy' state. It is the US that is the giver and Israel the receiver. This is an entirely different portrayal than that presented by Netanyahu in his speech before Congress – of two countries in a state of strategic cooperation in which both give and receive in a way that serves their national interests.

The President's speech contained no expression of Israel's contribution to either the US or its status as a strategic asset for the United States. In a roundabout way, perhaps, a certain justification was given to those who claim that Israel has become a sort of strategic burden on the shoulders of the US. To a great extent, they argue, the US sacrifices its interests in many countries, mainly in the Arab and Islamic world, due to Israel.

### **The Peace Process**

**T**here can be no doubt that President Obama is well aware of the criticism levelled against him in regard to his handling of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Referring implicitly to this criticism, the President makes it clear that he has no reason to apologize for what he has done in this context. Israeli leaders, like him, support the idea of two states for two peoples; that peace is in Israeli interest; that the reality Israel lives under obliges a solution to the conflict; that Israel's status, as a Jewish and democratic state must be preserved.

The President stressed his awareness of the grave difficulties towards an Israeli-Palestinian peace. Peace, he made it clear, would be hard to achieve. It is a matter of fact that over many long years, no one has been able to achieve it. The stormy state of affairs in the Arab world makes it even more difficult to find a solution to this long enduring conflict. Nevertheless, we should not give in to despair. The changes occurring in the region, maintained Obama, make the need for peace even more vital for Israel. The US is encouraging Israeli leaders to be more resolute in the pursuit of peace. At the same time, he observed, we continue to insist that the Palestinians must recognize Israel's right to exist and oppose violence. The administration, he made it clear, opposes an imposed solution. No American President in the past, President Obama stressed, has spoken about Israel at the UN like this President has.

The fact that the President focused first on the Palestinian issue and only then on the Iranian issue holds, in our estimation, a clear message for the Israeli government. This American administration has not forsaken its commitment to the continuation of the peace process in the region. Commentaries voiced in Israel ostensibly that Netanyahu had succeeded in changing the agenda in the region and drawing focus on the Iranian issue rather than the Palestinian issue, are baseless. The administration has adhered to its commitment to bring about a solution to the conflict through the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

It is obvious that at this time—in view of the focus on the Iranian issue, the dramatic events in the Arab world and mainly in Syria, and the upcoming US election campaign—the administration is hindered from dedicating deserving attention to this issue. But whoever thinks that the issue has been totally abandoned and that the administration is choosing to avoid re-entering the 'minefield' (as the administration has phrased it) of the Israel-Palestinian conflict is hugely mistaken.

The fact that the President chose to say these things in Netanyahu's 'home field', to a Jewish audience highly sympathetic to Netanyahu and his policy, attests to his present sense of confidence in the face of his political adversaries. All this against a background of seemingly inexhaustible difficulties in the Republican camp and the absence of a 'key player' able to pull in voters. Also, the apparent improvement in the US economic situation works in the President's favour against his critics, from both the left and right, domestically and overseas.

The President makes it clear that he regrets nothing he has done in his efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Doubtlessly, the President could have judged that such types of pronouncements would not be cheerfully received by the Jewish lobby—after its spokespersons had levelled criticisms against his attitude towards Israel, claiming a one-sided, unbalanced and largely hostile attitude towards Israel and its prime minister.

The President made it clear that he demands that the Palestinians recognize the state of Israel and avoid violence; however he does not call attention to the demand of the Netanyahu government

that the Palestinians recognize Israel as the 'state of the Jewish People'. The absence of this demand from the Palestinian side, on such an emotionally laden issue, is surely a source of deep disappointment for Netanyahu. It seemed that he had convinced the administration of the necessity that it demand that the Palestinians recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish People. The lack of this demand also constitutes a message of defiance to Congress, which, in its assorted resolutions in recent years, has insistently demanded that the Palestinians recognize Israel as the Jewish national state.

Very gently, Obama also rejects the argument voiced more than once by the prime minister in the past year, which implies that the 'Arab Spring' obliges a cautious and highly patient approach to the peace process. Practically speaking, those words imply an inclination to postpone deliberation over a solution to the conflict, with a focus on managing the conflict based on the existing status quo. The President does not assign a timetable for achieving a solution to the conflict as he and his predecessors have done in the past. He does however express an opinion that is reserved from that of Netanyahu's, stressing that the storm raging in the Arab world only makes peace even more vital for all the parties concerned.

### **The Iranian issue**

**T**he President expressed his understanding for the weight of the decision on Israel's shoulders as regards the Iran issue. He makes it clear that a nuclear Iran is contrary to the interests of both Israel and the US. He stresses the dangers that are inherent in a nuclear Iran. The US, he made it clear, will use any means at its disposal in order to prevent a nuclear Iran. Thus, he accords legitimacy to Israel's fears in this regard. Previously, he had mentioned in an interview to NBC that Israel "is very worried, and justifiably so, about the Iranian threat."

The President emphasized the dramatic change he has spearheaded in the attitude of the international community towards Iran and its nuclear activity. He maintained that when he entered office, Iran worked virtually undisturbed in the nuclear sphere.

The President defended the policy of engagement with Iran that he has led, despite the criticism it has attracted. He maintained that this policy enabled the US to bring in the international community to act against Iran, as it had never done previously. The policy exposed Iran's stubbornness and its unwillingness to reach a compromise on the nuclear issue and resulted in unprecedented pressure on Iran. Even Russia and China have joined in the sanctions, which have slowed down Iran's nuclear project. Today, Iran is isolated; its leadership in a loose state.

It appears that his words on the inclusion of Russia and China in the sanctions paint an overly 'ideal' picture of the issue. It is also unclear exactly when the sanctions led Iran to slow down its nuclear development policy. The President stressed the need for continuing the political-diplomatic process vis-à-vis Iran, and giving it a chance. Still, he admits that there is no guarantee that Iran will yield to the pressure. The President emphasized that he always prefers

peaceful means over war. He is familiar with the atrocities of war. Israel's leaders also know the horrors of war. The President could have naturally assumed that this type of statement might lead some American public figures to claim that it was Israel that drew the US into a casualty- laden war. Such voices were heard in various circles in the US within the context of the war in Iraq.

The President stressed that Iran's leaders should have no doubt as to the US determination to prevent them from attaining nuclear weapons. He reemphasized that his administration is not excluding the military option. The US does not have a policy of containment, but rather of preventing Iran from attaining a nuclear weapon. However, the President makes it clear that the timing of an operation against Iran is highly critical factor in his decision making vis-à-vis Iran. The President makes it clear that the United States will use force only when it would seem necessary for US interests.

In fairly unconcealed criticism of the highly public debate in Israel over Iran, the President stressed that "there is too much loose talk of war." Such talk only benefits the Iranian leadership and leads it to drive up the price of oil. "For the sake of Israel's security, America's security...now is not the time for bluster". The President could have certainly estimated that this would be considered as a painful statement for Israel, since it would link the oil prices to Israel's internal debates over Iran. What is implied explicitly is that it is Israel that is guilty of higher oil prices in the US. It is difficult to know if there is indeed justification for the President's claim. There have been assessments in the past that the US itself, and certainly the Gulf States headed by Saudi Arabia, have the power to balance the shortage of Iranian fuel by increasing fuel production in their countries.

The President stressed that Iran should have no doubt as to Israel's sovereign right to make its own decisions over what is required to meet its security needs. In talking to the press and in the presence of the President, Netanyahu underlined his appreciation for the President's words in this regard and made it clear that "Israel is the master of its fate" as to determining its security needs. After the meeting, Netanyahu was quoted as having said that Israel's position concerning its right to defend itself against any threat was received with understanding by President Obama.

## Summary

There is a current dispute among numerous researchers and government figures: The question is whether President Obama's present demonstratively sympathetic attitude towards Israel and its security needs constitutes a strategic change in his policy as compared to that which characterized his first year in office. As is well known, the past two years of his term have seen a great deal of tension in Israel-US relations. The administration has chosen to emphasize that, in its eyes, the central issue on the agenda is an Israel-Palestinian accord. It went beyond that – by determining that a settlement of the Iranian problem involves an Israeli-Palestinian accord and that it is not possible to engage countries in the region with the struggle against Iran in the absence of such an accord.

These positions, it can be recalled, led to the Obama administration's vigorous demand for Israel to freeze settlement activity as per the demand of the Palestinian side. At the same time, the administration had made it clear to Israel that on the Iranian issue, it intended to focus on a political mode of action—in negotiations with Iran—rather than threats to act if it continues its nuclear activity.

In recent months, there has been a conspicuous change in the President's pronouncements on these issues. The messages conveyed to Iran have been considerably more militant and unequivocal than in the past. At the same time, the Palestinian issue has been deflected to a distant corner. Many have supposed a strategic change in the positions of the administration. Now, in light of the President's speech to AIPAC, there is room to wonder: Is this in fact a strategic change, or could this perhaps involve a tactical change connected with the fact that this is an election year in the US.

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