

One Step forward, Two Steps Back:

Assessing Obama's speech in Jerusalem

A week before Mr. Obama went to Israel, the **Economist Magazine** had a suggestion about what he should say. Entitled "Spell it out Obama", a lead editorial argued that "As more people bemoan the death of a two-state solution, Barak Obama must strive to keep it alive."

He seems to have listened, and selling hope is something Mr. Obama is rather good at.



Obama's speech to "The People of Israel" at the Jerusalem International Convention Centre last week aimed to give hope to Palestinians, and even to some young Israelis. It appears to have been successful, as evidenced by the repeated rounds of applause he received.

After a very long introductory section of his main speech in Jerusalem, praising Israel's brilliance, technological and academic prowess (all quite justified), professing deep friendship between the two countries, and vowing to defend Israel against all comers, Obama turned to the Palestinian issue, saying that peace was necessary, just and possible.

One step forward

Obama directly addressed the question of Israeli control over the West Bank, using words that, as far as anybody can tell, have never been used by a serving US President. He said the words "independent Palestine" twice. He called the IDF a "foreign army." He condemned settler

violence which goes unpunished. He even used the word “occupation,” which of course Israel still denies it is doing. “Neither occupation nor expulsion is the answer,” he said to a round of applause.

He even asked the young Israelis in the audience to put themselves “in the shoes” of the Palestinians.

All of this is a very big change in American public discourse. “No American president or Israeli statesman has ever delivered a speech like this,” noted Gideon Levy, a well-known and well respected columnist for the Jerusalem daily Ha’aretz. “It deserves to enter the history books – and Israel’s textbooks.”

In speaking the way he did, Obama was directly criticizing the most racist Israeli politicians like Avigdor Lieberman and others who openly talk about expelling the remaining Palestinian citizens of Israel. He was also talking to those Israeli politicians who want Israel to completely take over the West Bank.

This part of Obama’s speech humanized the Palestinians, sympathized with them and invited Israelis to do the same. In the current context of ugly anti-Arab racism that pervades Israel, and is reflected at the highest political levels, it inspired hope that things can change.

But two steps back

While inspiring hope among many, his presentation also marked a significant retreat from his speech in Cairo in 2009.

Back then, Obama was quite clear on the issue of the settlements. “The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop,” said Mr. Obama in Cairo.

Four years later, in Jerusalem, his only reference to the settlements was to say “it’s not right when settler violence against Palestinians goes unpunished.” No mention about whether the existing settlements, or even the construction of new ones, are an issue. It would appear that he now just wishes the violent settlers who attack Palestinians be brought to judgment (i.e. not even calling for a stop to their violent attacks).

In Cairo, Obama also recognized that many Palestinians are still in refugee camps on Israel’s borders. “It is undeniable that the Palestinian people (...) have suffered in pursuit of a homeland. For more than sixty years they have endured the pain of dislocation. Many wait in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza, and neighboring lands for a life of peace and security that they have never been able to lead.”

This time, in Jerusalem, the refugees were not even mentioned. It is as if the refugee question no longer existed, or was even worth mentioning.

The only concerns Obama seems to have now are for those Palestinians living in the West Bank (in fact, although he mentioned the West Bank several times, the word Gaza only crossed his lips once.) Obama's two-state solution therefore seems to only focus on the West Bank, which is 22% of the total area of historic Palestine and where about a quarter of the total Palestinian population lives.

The second step backward is worse

Having apparently narrowed the Palestinian question to the West Bank, Obama then introduced something completely new into official US discourse. "Palestinians must recognize Israel as a Jewish state," he demanded.

This is both new and significant. In Cairo he had simply repeated the American position that Israel should be recognized as a State. (Israel's peace treaty with Egypt, for example, recognizes the State of Israel. It says nothing about Israel as a "Jewish State".)

To those who have not visited Israel, the real meaning of "Israel as a Jewish state" might not be immediately obvious. Of course Israel is, in every possible way a "Jewish country". Eighty percent of its citizens are Jewish. Its flag is the Star of David, its weekend is Friday/Saturday, its national holidays are the Jewish holidays, there is a mezuzah on every doorway and so on. Nobody could mistake it for anything else.

In a similar vein, (though with rather less fervour) it is also fair to say that Canada is a Christian country. (77% of Canadians say they are Christian, we generally follow Christian traditions & holidays, and even our swear words often have a Christian origin, etc.)

But while Canada is a Christian country, it is a secular state. That is to say, we are all equal before the law. All Canadians, whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, atheist or otherwise, are all LEGALLY equal.

Israel, on the other hand, describes itself as a "Jewish State," a state in which dozens of laws explicitly favour Jews and therefore discriminate against about the 20% of its population that is non-Jewish (mainly Muslim and Christian citizens of Palestinian origin).

Of course, there is discrimination and racism in every country in the world, including Canada and Israel. But in a secular, democratic state like Canada, discrimination on racial or religious grounds is against the law.

Israeli law does say that everyone is equal. But it also says that Israel is a Jewish state. Where these two notions are in contradiction, the Jewishness almost always trumps the democracy. As a result, in the Jewish State of Israel, the courts have found that it is legal to favour Jews (i.e. discriminate against non-Jews) in housing, education, employment, land ownership, family reunification amongst other areas. In fact, there are an increasing number of laws in Israel that specifically favour Jews – even secular Jews who are not religious at all.

In calling on the Palestinians to recognize Israel as a Jewish state, Mr Obama apparently accepts (or is unaware of) these flagrant violations of basic democracy. Ironically, Israel continues to call itself the “only democracy in the Middle East”, even as a democratic wave gradually sweeps through many parts of the region. Meanwhile, Israel’s new laws make it increasingly similar to those states in the Middle East which are resisting the democratic trend.

Summary

Mr. Obama seems to have followed the Economist’s suggestion – to keep alive the hope that someday there might be a two state solution. To keep that “hope” alive, and to maintain credibility in the Western World, he had to show the Palestinians in the West Bank that he “understood” their pain, while at the same time telling Israelis that the US would back them, no matter what. He appears to have been brilliantly successful.

At the same time, however, he backtracked significantly on his earlier statements in Cairo. He narrowed the issue to mean only the West Bank, apparently giving up any sympathy for the 4.7 million Palestinian refugees and essentially ignoring Gaza. And he even gave in on a basic tenet of US democracy – namely that all citizens are equal – by endorsing an undemocratic Jewish State which legally discriminates against 20% of its own population.

I call that one step forward, two steps back.

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