

# What Obama needs to do for Mideast Peace

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United States President Barack Obama failed at the New York summit. In Jerusalem, Ramallah, Tel Aviv and Hebron, his call for an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was like raindrops streaming down an opaque window. Obama spoke of the critical importance of "solving this issue," as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas looked on with evident disinterest. Obama did not succeed in breaking through the walls of indifference, distrust and frustration of two peoples who know no other way of life but national conflict.

More than other leaders, Obama must know that revolutions need people capable of bringing about change. He was elected to the presidency because his call for change excited millions of Americans who believed him. This has not happened in the Middle East. Here, Obama is perceived not as an exciting revolutionary, but as a nuisance, recycling slogans borrowed from his predecessors. This is what enables the prime minister of Israel and the president of the Palestinian Authority to procrastinate, using attrition maneuvers and blaming each other.

Obama has not succeeded in enlisting even one supporter in Israel's public arena or political establishment, who will stand up to Netanyahu and call upon him to accept the president's initiative and gallop toward a "two-state solution." The Israelis don't think establishment of a state headed by Abbas will improve their situation in any way. The hard-core ideological left is fighting the Israel Defense Forces in the name of pacifism, and striving for a binational state in the name of equality and liberalism. The right is striving for a binational state in the name of the Greater Land of Israel, fulfillment of the Bible's promises and the security afforded by dominating the hilltops.

The Israeli political center, which stretches from Culture and Sports Minister Limor Livnat and Education Minister Gideon Sa'ar of the Likud party, through MKs Tzipi Livni and Shaul Mofaz of Kadima to President Shimon Peres (most recently of Kadima) and Defense Minister Ehud Barak of Labor, in effect accepts the assessment of Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman that a solution to the problem is not possible, that the Arabs will never recognize a Jewish state and that Israel's only strategic option is deterrence backed by the use of force.

On Wednesday at the United Nations General Assembly, Obama spoke of the "girl in Sderot who closes her eyes in fear that a rocket will take her life in the night." His concern is touching, but most Israelis believe that Operation Cast Lead reassured the children of Sderot far more than the peace process Obama proposes.

The public opinion polls Netanyahu reads indicate a clear trend: Most Israelis these days are more troubled by domestic issues, like education and violence, than by Jewish settlements in the territories or even the Iranian threat. The public wants the government to improve its quality of life, not to hold more peace conferences. Abbas is perceived as recalcitrant, not as a partner to an agreement.

Only one thing does bother the Israelis, according to the polls: fear of a diplomatic embargo and an international boycott. The Goldstone Report and the International Court of Justice in The Hague are arousing concern and interest, far more than Obama's peace speeches. However, as long as relations with the rest of the world are satisfactory, Israelis see no reason to emerge from indifference and listen to the president of the United States.

### **No sense of urgency**

The left's long-standing argument that education and personal security will improve only if we rid ourselves of the settlements and end the occupation does not convince the Israeli public. The right's argument that things only got worse when Israel pulled out of Gaza is more widely accepted.

Nor are the Palestinians thrilled by Obama. A survey published this week by the International Peace Institute, headed by Terje Larsen, the former mediator from the time of the Oslo cords, has found that 70 percent of Palestinians do not support the U.S. president, and 56 percent do not expect Obama to achieve progress in the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. And this in a public opinion poll in which most of the respondents expressed support for Abbas, not Hamas.

Obama is right in saying that success depends on a sense of urgency. However, the Israelis and the Palestinians do not sense urgency, and Obama is not succeeding in convincing them that they are mistaken. Obama expressed his frustration to Netanyahu and Abbas in a public rebuke and in his closed talks with them, and has set an accelerated timetable for talks on resuming the negotiations. His frustration and dwindling patience express a sincere assessment of reality, but the president of the superpower was elected to lead, not to grumble or compete with us, the commentators.

And in order to lead, he must articulate a clear path that everyone in Israel and the territories can support. His decline in public opinion polls and the loss of the messianic aura he enjoyed when he was elected derive from the vagueness and abstruseness of his messages. It is easy to identify with change and with the slogan "Yes, we can" from the days of the campaign, but not with the complex formulations Obama presented in his health plan or with unclear goals of the war in Afghanistan.

### **Risk-free slogans**

The principles Obama presented for resolving the conflict in the Middle East at the three-way summit on Tuesday and in his speech to the General Assembly the following day did not require special sophistication. They suffered from the chronic illness of American

peace initiatives in this region, "constructive ambiguity," in Henry Kissinger's definition. Instead of proposing practical solutions to real problems, slogans are used that ostensibly satisfy the demands of the opposing sides. In this way, the United States remains in the middle, projecting involvement and caring with minimum risk or political price.

Here are two examples: Obama has said - following in the footsteps of former president George W. Bush - that the Palestinian state will lead "to the end of the occupation that began in 1967." Netanyahu and his buddies on the right, who completely reject the claim that there is an occupation, would supposedly be angry and insulted. But the American formula does not say that occupation is wrong or improper, only that it will end of its own accord if a Palestinian state is established within some kind of border. This leaves tremendous scope for territorial and procedural flexibility, without really offering a solution.

Obama said he "emphasizes" that "America does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements." There is no doubt that a statement like this will not bring him supporters in the Yesha Council of settlers or the protest tents of the right wing, but it is as hollow as his talk about ending the occupation. One can understand from it, for example, that the United States does accept the legitimacy of the settlements built until now. It is also not clear what is meant by "does not accept the legitimacy." That it is necessary to dismantle the settlements? That no new housing should be built in them? That the settlers are bad people? Or that the president of the United States just wants his opposition to the settlements to become a matter of record, without quarrelling with Israel and its supporters in America?

In his vague formulations, Obama is acknowledging that he has no idea how to resolve the conflict, and that there is no backing for his claim that a solution is possible. He has given up on the "confidence-building measures" he had hoped to achieve - a settlement freeze in return for El Al being allowed to overfly Saudi Arabia - and is now urging the sides to renew negotiations quickly, "without prior conditions."

Netanyahu interprets this as a victory: Construction in the settlements will continue and Israel will go into talks without promising the Palestinians anything. There is no danger to the integrity of the coalition and the unity of Likud. Obama, too, is minimizing his political risk by delegating the negotiations to his rival, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Here is an elegant way to attribute the expected failure to her and to damage her chances of a rematch against Obama.

Some say that Obama quite simply erred in issuing the invitations to the summit. Imagine what would have happened in Israeli public opinion, said one political advisor this week, if instead of Abbas, we had seen Syrian President Bashar Assad sitting next to Netanyahu.

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