



INSS Insight No. 704, June 2, 2015

The Obama Administration and the Israeli-Palestinian Political Process: A Change of Approach?

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In President Obama's May 15, 2015 interview with the *al-Arabiya* newspaper, one of the subjects raised was the Israeli-Palestinian political process. The President spoke about the possibility of progress toward fulfilling the vision of two states for two peoples that he pursued consistently (albeit at varying levels of intensity) since entering the White House in early 2009. He stressed that in approaching this "very difficult challenge," he needs to balance between two guiding considerations. On the one hand, he is driven by his "deep and strong" support for Israel and its close relations with the US, and is mindful of Israel's "legitimate security concerns." On the other hand, the President stressed that he clings to the idea of establishing a Palestinian state, since he believes this is the only solution that will both guarantee Israel's future as a Jewish democratic state and address the hardship of the Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In subsequent statements the following week, including an interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic* and a speech at a synagogue in Washington, the President reiterated that the two-state solution provides the best answer to Israel's security needs in the long term, and reflects the Jewish values on which Israel was founded. The President clarified that he was aware that this solution would require Israel to take risks, but said that the numerous risks of continuing the present situation were far more significant. Nonetheless, the President stated, given his view of current internal politics in Israel and among the Palestinians, it will be very hard to generate the trust between the sides that could enable a political breakthrough.

In touching upon the political system in Israel, President Obama was almost certainly referring to the recent formation of a narrow coalition government with a decided right wing orientation. In the Palestinian context, he was presumably referring to the schism between the Palestinian Authority, which governs in the West Bank, and Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip. On both sides, the President said, there are "people of goodwill" who understand the need to advance a solution. However, "unfortunately, the politics of fear has been stronger than the politics of hope over recent years -- partly because of the

chaotic situation in the region overall." Therefore, the President concluded, it will take time to rebuild trust between the sides.

Under the existing circumstances, the US can try to rebuild trust between the sides, though "not through a big overarching deal," which according to the President is likely not possible in the next year. In the context of what can be done, the President mentioned the agreed-upon plans for reconstructing the Gaza Strip, agreements of a socio-economic nature, and more. Such finite arrangements, said the President, would strengthen support for "the logic of a two-state solution."

President Obama also stressed the concerns regarding a continuation of the political status quo that are being voiced in many circles in Israel. He asserted that Israel will need to recognize that it cannot remain a state that is both Jewish and a democracy if the current situation persists. Conversely, the Palestinians cannot refuse to recognize Israel, since Israel is "not going anywhere." His statements reflected his awareness that Israel's demand of the Palestinians does not end solely with recognition of Israel as a sovereign state – this was already specified in the framework of the Oslo Accords – and includes recognition of Israel as the national state of the Jewish people, a demand the Palestinian Authority rejects. However, the President – presumably intentionally – avoided explicit reference to this issue. Secretary of State John Kerry has also clarified that in principle the US recognizes the need for the Palestinians to recognize Israel as a Jewish state, although when and how this would be done, he said, must be part of negotiations between the sides. Clearly, this would not occur at the beginning of discussions, but rather at the end.

The President's statements include a number of interesting and even new aspects. First, the President demonstrated a clear intention to maintain a balance between Israel and the Palestinians. Up to now, throughout Obama's term of office, the brunt of the blame for lack of progress in the peace process was directed at Israel, particularly at Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The central factor generally cited was Israeli construction activity in the West Bank; this was cast as the main obstacle to progress in the political process. For his part, Secretary Kerry laid the primary blame on Israel for the failure of the talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority/PLO conducted under his leadership. From his comments of April 8, 2014, one could discern his sense that Israel's announcement on construction of 700 housing units in Jerusalem was what halted his mission in the region. However, in his recent statements, the President avoided laying the blame directly on Israel and on Prime Minister Netanyahu; the lack of any reference to the settlements was particularly noteworthy. At the same time, the reference to "the politics of fear" being stronger than "the politics of hope" was almost certainly directed at Prime Minister Netanyahu.

The President's comments reflect his inclination to draw away from his commitment to achieve a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian agreement – a goal he had embraced since his entry into office. Rather, he expressed clear support for measured and limited steps, mainly of an economic nature, aimed at creating an atmosphere of trust and cooperation even in the absence of a political agreement. The presumption is that the ensuing cooperation would ease the task of hammering out an agreement in the coming years. Proposals in this vein were put forward in the past by political and academic elements in Israel, but were not endorsed by the Obama administration. It appears that now, even the President would be ready to examine seriously the feasibility of those proposals.

A further change in the administration's approach to the political process is the President's lack of reference to any set timetable for reaching an agreement. This altered approach implies recognition on the part of the administration that processes of renewing trust and negotiations must be given the time they need, not constricted by rigid and unrealistic target dates. The President stated explicitly that rebuilding trust "will take some time," and agreed (even if implicitly) with the claim voiced in Israel, that instability in the Middle East would make it difficult to formulate a stable arrangement that could be guaranteed over the years.

The President's interview with *al-Arabiya* occurred several weeks after the White House clarified that it does not support France's intention to raise the Palestinian issue for discussion at UN institutions in the near future. Administration officials explained that the administration is focusing its attention on negotiations with Iran over the nuclear issue and the need to finalize them by the end of June. Attention to the Palestinian issue, they say, will be postponed until handling of the Iranian issue is complete.

This too represents a new approach to the agenda. Over the years, the Obama administration has stood by its "linkage" approach, which insists that despite Israel's contention to the contrary, attention to the Israeli-Palestinian political process should not be postponed before the removal of the Iranian threat. Indeed, the theory was that an Israeli-Palestinian arrangement would have positive implications for America's standing in Islamic countries as well as its ability to arrive at what from the US vantage is a positive agreement with Iran. Recent statements by officials in the administration attest to a distancing from this outlook, evidence of recognition that an Israeli-Palestinian arrangement is not in the immediate offing.

Nonetheless, President Obama's most recent statements clearly indicate that he attributes great importance to progress regarding the two-state vision. Therefore the administration will presumably restore this issue to the agenda when the negotiations between Iran and the Western powers on the nuclear question are concluded. The President made it clear that in his opinion, a two-state solution realizes the values and interests of Israel, and that

he recognizes Israel's security needs (one concrete expression of this by the administration was at the recent 2015 NPT Review Conference, when the US blocked an Egyptian proposal to convene an international conference next year on a Middle East WMD-free zone). At the same time, it is a virtually certain that the President expects Israel to act in the spirit of the "politics of hope" by taking the initiative toward a political settlement. Perhaps the willingness expressed by Prime Minister Netanyahu in his meeting with European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini to discuss the subject of borders and the future of settlement blocs in the West Bank acknowledges the need to formulate a response to the President's expectations – although it is difficult to believe that in its current constellation, the Israel government will want, or be able, to take significant measures in this direction.

