

Shalom TV **OPINION**

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MIS-HEARING OBAMA; AN OPPORTUNITY MISSED

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The late Abba Eban was fond of saying that "the Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity." This saying could be applied to the way in which many in the Jewish community have reacted with criticism to President Obama's comments last Thursday (May 19) regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The President may have, in the past, articulated an approach that has been disturbing to many supporters of Israel, seeming to favor the Palestinian agenda in ways that depart from long standing American Middle East policy. But prior disappointments should not prejudice Jewish thinking to the point that Jews fail to correctly hear and appreciate a presidential message that articulates many profoundly important truths about Israel and the Palestinians--all of which Jews have prayed would be said publicly by the occupant of the White House.



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Despite President Obama's presenting a host of specifics that were powerfully pro-Israel, the Jewish community has myopically placed an exaggerated emphasis on what Mr. Obama did not say, blaming him for not going far enough in expressing an anti-Palestinian line, and for referencing the '67 borders in a two-state solution.

When Mr. Obama spoke to the Arab Muslim world in Cairo in June 2009, I was extremely critical of the President's description of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (evoking ire among many of my friends who were wildly enthusiastic Obama supporters). In his Cairo address, Mr. Obama adopted the Palestinian "narrative" which replaces history with mythology, proffers an artificial and reprehensible moral equivalency, and suggests the State of Israel's sole justification is the Holocaust (for which Palestinians brazenly and erroneously claim no culpability).

I expected to be similarly disappointed with Mr. Obama's Middle East remarks at the State Department. But both in tone and in substance, the President expressed a dramatically different perspective from that of his address at Cairo University--and sadly, it is disappointing that so many Jews are oblivious to the differences.

The list of positives in Mr. Obama's policy statement are most impressive and provide superb ammunition against those seeking to delegitimize the Jewish State of Israel.

In last week's speech, the President positioned the Jewish People's right to a safe and secure homeland in Israel as the top priority and reaffirmed America's unwavering commitment and support, what he described in his address to AIPAC on Sunday as "ironclad." The President was eloquent in speaking of America's support of Israel as "rooted deeply in a shared history and shared values;" and specifically struck out against those would apply a double standard in their evaluations of Israel, saying that the US "will stand against attempts to single [Israel] out for criticism in international forums."

Also of extreme import, the President explicitly referred to Israel as the "Jewish" state--a description which, surprisingly, created significant controversy (even among some American Jews) when Prime Minister Netanyahu insisted on including the words "Jewish state" in describing his own commitment to a two-state solution.

It is noteworthy that the President's began his actual description of the deadlock in the peace process by publicly acknowledging Palestinian efforts to delegitimize Israel and declaring that those efforts "will end in failure." The President also took on Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinians by warning against any "symbolic" Arab effort to seek statehood in the United Nations in September; singled out Hamas' terror and rejectionism as obstacles to peace; criticized the Palestinians alone for abandoning peace negotiations; and verbalized the overarching message the Jewish community has been pleading with the world to embrace: "Palestinians will never realize their independence by denying the right of Israel to exist."

And finally, in referencing the peace process itself, the President finally acknowledged that no peace can be imposed upon Israel from the outside--not even by the United States.

I cannot remember an American President ever being so clear in summarizing the requisite Palestinian responsibilities incumbent upon them if they truly wish to achieve peace and an independent state; nor has any President made a stronger public declaration of the US commitment to the security, character and integrity of the Jewish State of Israel.

The President had every right to expect that the Jewish world would applaud his remarks and that the Arab world would feel it had been dealt a serious dose of reality. Why, then, did the speech engender such a negative reaction within the Jewish community?

Jewish critics of the President's remarks focus on two issues. First, that while the President did reference the obstacle created by the Fatah-Hamas alliance in asking Israel to enter negotiations with "a party that has shown itself unwilling to recognize your right to exist," the President did not go far enough as to say that America would support Israel's legitimate refusal to sit at a peace table until the Palestinians do honestly embrace Israel's right to exist.

I, too, wish the President had made Palestinian recognition of Israel a prerequisite for any peace negotiations. Arab rejectionism is at the heart of the conflict that preceded Israeli statehood in 1948, precipitated the Six Day War of 1967 which resulted in Israel winding up in control of the West Bank, and has been the one enduring issue preventing peace between the parties.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not about borders, and never has been; the conflict is about a Zionist existence anywhere in the region. To place the focus on "settlements" or "occupation," as Israel's critics have done, and as President Obama has been wont to do in prior comments, is to confuse the symptoms of the problem with the cause of the disease.

The disease that eats away at any possibility for peace in the Middle East is a deep-seated refusal within the Arab world to share the land with a Jewish state in any way at all! It mystifies me that this simple reality seems to escape the understanding of so many otherwise intelligent and well-meaning people.

But no President has yet to make this argument. President Obama should at least get credit for shining a light on the problem created by the Fatah-Hamas agreement and for at least posing the rhetorical question: "How can one negotiate with a party that has shown itself unwilling to recognize your right to exist?"

The other supposed grievous failure in the President's speech is in his reference to a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders. American Jews, and the Israeli Prime Minister, have characterized this statement as a major break with prior US policy and a virtual betrayal of Israel, arguing that the pre-June '67 borders render the State of Israel indefensible.

I don't understand the degree of hysteria over the President's reference to '67 lines--and I have not found anyone who can explain it to me. Every description of a two-state solution has been predicated on a modification of the '67 "Green Line" (the cease fire lines that became Israel's borders when the Arab attempt to destroy the State of Israel in 1948 ended in failure). Didn't Ehud Barak's generous offer to Yasser Arafat at Camp David in 2000 work from modified '67 borders? Didn't Ehud Olmert's celebrated offer to Mahmoud Abbas in 2008 do the same? Hasn't it always been argued that "everyone understands" that a two-state solution will involve a "swap of territory" so that Israel will be permitted to retain portions of the West Bank that contain Jewish population centers surrounding Jerusalem; will expand Israel at its narrowest point; and will involve a compromise on the Golan Heights in order to insure Israeli security; in return for land that was inside the 1967 Green Line of Israel?

All President Obama did is articulate the formula which the Jewish world has been arguing for: "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." As the President accurately told his APIAC audience, "There was nothing particularly original in my proposal; this basic framework for negotiations has long been the basis for discussions among the parties, including previous US Administrations."

Note, the President specifically said the borders should be "based on" the 1967 lines--not the '67 lines themselves; and his words include "with mutually agreed swaps"--which has been the consistent Israeli position in contrast to the Arab misreading of UN Resolution 242 (which the Arabs contend refers to the literal '67 lines without modifications). And the President is predicating any new borders upon the principle that Israel be "secure," the ultimate Jewish concern with any new border design.

Again at APIAC, the President made his position clear: "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. 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, including the new demographic realities on the ground and the needs of both sides."

The State of Israel could not have said it better than the President did on Thursday, and again on Sunday at AIPAC: "Every state has the right to self-defense, and Israel must be able to defend itself--by itself--against any threat," robust enough "to prevent a resurgence of terrorism, to stop the infiltration of weapons, and to provide effective border security."

Perhaps the real reason so many in the Jewish community did not hear the overwhelming good in the President's remarks last Thursday is that the Mr. Obama's prior statements and actions--such as elevating the issue of settlements as if they are the principle obstacle to peace and in his inappropriate treatment of Prime Minister Netanyahu during a White House visit last year--have so damaged his credibility and a sense trust among many pro-Israel supporters that his message is dismissed out of hand. Mr. Netanyahu's apparent dispute with reference to using the '67 lines has also caused many to believe there is something new in the President's formula.

But President Obama has the right to learn and grow. His speech on Thursday, parts of which he reiterated virtually verbatim in his appearance at APIAC, indicates a change in approach which may well indicate he has done both. As for Mr. Netanyahu's objection to Mr. Obama's reference to '67 borders, the President was only making public what has been understood by all to be the working template for the past generation; and, as the brilliant editor of the *Jerusalem Post*, David Horovitz, suggest to me, Mr. Netanyahu's cause for concern was that the President has already played Israel's best card in the negotiations (i.e. the West Ban) without insisting the Palestinians would do the same (i.e. relinquish their claim of a right of return).

In the end, Mr. Netanyahu must deal with Mr. Obama in the way he feels is in the best interests of the State of Israel. American Jews, on the other hand, can serve the State of Israel by listening to what the President is actually proposing without prejudice.

American Jews who have heard an anti-Israel bias in President Obama's address on the Middle East are not only doing him injustice, they are missing an invaluable opportunity to trumpet the President's positive messages regarding the State of Israel--ones which he made before the entire world and which the entire world should well heed.

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