



118

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NETANYAHU VS. OBAMA: The speeches at the crossroads

Eduard Soler i Lecha, Research fellow, CIDOB

In less than a week we have heard two important speeches in regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The first, delivered in the White House on May 19 by President Obama, was mainly aimed at demonstrating that the United States stands by those who have fought and continue to fight for freedom and rights in the Arab world, and the support of the U.S. for the democratic transitions taking place in Tunisia and Egypt. Obama, who also spoke of Gaddafi, Syria, and Iran, or of specific initiatives in the form of funds on hand for the region, could simply have tiptoed around the topic of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but he didn't. To the contrary, the U.S. President said, "We believe 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." What's more, Obama interpellated Israel by recalling that, precisely because of the friendship that unites the two countries, "...it's important that we tell the truth: The status quo is unsustainable..." The future of Israel, as a democratic, Jewish State, would be in danger if there were not a decisive advance in the recognition of a Palestinian State.

A few days later, on May 24, Benjamin Netanyahu addressed the United States Congress. The invitation had been extended by the Republican leadership, and he had before him a particularly receptive audience that burst into applause throughout his speech. Netanyahu's speech also began by commending the Arab citizens who had risen up in defense of democracy, but this was not the purpose of his allocution. Before Congress and, more concretely, before the Republican majority, Netanyahu wanted to clarify his red lines with regard to the Palestinian question. A topic that will only take on greater significance as we approach the annual session of the United Nations General Assembly in September, when it is expected that a resolution recognizing the State of Palestine could have the support of as many as 170 of the 192 member states.

The red lines mentioned by Netanyahu in the Congress are numerous: recognition of Israel as a Jewish State, the indivisibility of Jerusalem as the national capital and of greater Tel Aviv, a demilitarized Palestinian State, maintenance of the Israeli military presence along the Jordan River, renunciation of the refugees' right to return, and the breaking of the accord between Fatah and a Hamas referred to as "the Palestinian version of Al-Qaeda."

Though Netanyahu claims to be willing to make painful concessions, the negotiating position of the Israeli government remains very close to the status quo. As the May 25 editorial in Haaretz put it, we are witnessing “to the same old messages”. Netanyahu’s rigidity can be interpreted as a frontal delegitimization of Obama’s words. A questioning of the authority and capacity of the President of the United States to lead the two sides back to the negotiating table and who, as if that were not enough, will have to grapple with a Republican majority and also with a large sector of the Democratic Party that is hostile to a tightening of pressure on Israel.

In addition to the distance between Obama and Netanyahu and between Obama and Congress, we should consider the skepticism of public opinion in the Arab world regarding the ability of the U.S. to act as a neutral mediator in this conflict. Anti-Americanism, as reflected in a study by the Pew Research Institute published on May 17, continues to be very high. In the case of post-Mubarak Egypt as many as 79% of those interviewed had a negative image of the U.S. The warm reception of Congress to Netanyahu’s speech does little to change the perception of the United States as a biased player with a marked pro-Israel stance. If Obama doesn’t make a move and offer a clear response to Netanyahu’s position within the next few days, his White House speech will be relegated to little more than a dead letter.

Complicated months lie ahead for the peace process, marked by the success or failure of the consolidation of the accord between Hamas and Fatah, the tension that could accompany the arrival of a second fleet to Gaza in early June, and, above all, the likely recognition of the Palestinian State in the September session of the United Nations General Assembly, with the foreseeable opposition, however, of important western chancelleries, with the United States, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands in the lead. And the new variable added to this complicated equation: the impact on the conflict of the revolts in the Arab world. The Syrian government could try to play out an escalation of the tension in the Golan Heights to distract attention from its internal problems, an Egypt engaged in an electoral campaign cannot align with Israel without paying a price, and the citizens of the region have lost their fear of protesting and can engage in massive mobilizations. Aware of these additional difficulties, Obama has asked Netanyahu to make concessions that will allow for a return to the negotiating table and gain time before discussion of the unilateral recognition of Palestine. Netanyahu’s rigidity corresponds, in turn, to a way of understanding the Middle East that interprets any concession as a sign of weakness that endangers the survival of the State of Israel.