

Obama and AIPAC

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In many respects, presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama has played right into the hands of cynics who have long doubted his promises to create a new and more progressive role for the United States in the world. The very morning after the last primaries, in which he finally received a sufficient number of pledged delegates to secure the Democratic presidential nomination and no longer needed to win over voters from the progressive base of his own party, Obama — in a Clinton-style effort at triangulation — gave a major policy speech before the national convention of the America-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Embracing policies which largely backed those of the more hawkish voices concerned with Middle Eastern affairs, he received a standing ovation for his efforts.

His June 3 speech in Washington in many ways constituted a slap in the face of the grass roots peace and human rights activists who have brought him to the cusp of the Democratic presidential nomination.

In other respects, however, he pandered less to this influential lobbying group than many other serious aspirants for national office have historically. And at least part of his speech focused on convincing the largely right-wing audience members to support his positions rather than simply underscoring his agreement with them.

Much of the media attention placed upon his speech centered on the ongoing debate between him and incipient Republican presidential nominee John McCain on Iran. While embracing many of the same double-standards regarding nuclear nonproliferation issues and UN resolutions as does the Bush administration and congressional leaders of both parties, Obama did insert some rationality into the debate regarding the need for negotiations with that regional power rather than maintaining the current U.S. policy of diplomatic isolation and threats of war.

When it came to Israel and Palestine, however, Obama appeared to largely embrace a right-wing perspective which appeared to place all the blame for the ongoing violence and the impasse in the peace process on the Palestinians under occupation rather than the Israelis who are still occupying and colonizing the parts of their country seized by the Israeli army more than 40 years ago.

Progressive Israeli Reactions While there were some faint glimmers of hope in Obama's speech for those of us who support Israeli-Palestinian peace, progressive voices in Israel were particularly disappointed.

Israeli analyst Uri Avneri, in an essay entitled "No, I Can't!", expressed the bitterness of many Israeli peace activists for "a speech that broke all records for obsequiousness and fawning." Avneri goes on to observe the irony of how Obama's:

“dizzying success in the primaries was entirely due to his promise to bring about a change, to put an end to the rotten practices of Washington and to replace the old cynics with a young, brave person who does not compromise his principles. And lo and behold, the very first thing he does after securing the nomination of his party is to compromise his principles.”

Avneri addressed the view of many Israelis that “Obama’s declarations at the AIPAC conference are very, very bad for peace. And what is bad for peace is bad for Israel, bad for the world and bad for the Palestinian people.”

Support for Further Militarization In his speech, Obama rejected the view that the Middle East already has too many armaments and dismissed pleas by human rights activists that U.S. aid to Israel — like all countries — should be made conditional on adherence to international humanitarian law. Indeed, he further pledged an additional \$30 billion of taxpayer-funded military aid to the Israeli government and its occupation forces over the next decade with no strings attached. Rather than accept that strategic parity between potential antagonists is the best way, short of a full peace agreement, to prevent war and to maintain regional security, Obama instead insisted that the United States should enable Israel to maintain its “qualitative military edge.”

Over the past three years, the ratio of Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip killed by Israeli forces relative to the number of Israeli civilians in Israel killed by Palestinians is approximately 50 to one and has been even higher more recently. However, Obama chose only to mention the Israeli deaths and condemn Hamas, whose armed wing has been responsible for most of the Israeli casualties, and not a word about the moral culpability of the Israeli government, which Amnesty International and other human rights groups have roundly criticized for launching air strikes into Gaza’s densely crowded refugee camps and related tactics.

Since first running for the U.S. Senate, Obama has routinely condemned Arab attacks against Israeli civilians but has never condemned attacks against Arab civilians by Israelis. This apparent insistence that the lives of Palestinian and Lebanese civilian are somehow less worthy of attention than the lives of Israeli civilians have led to charges of racism on the part of Obama.

Despite his openness to talk with those governing Iran and North Korea, Obama emphasized his opposition to talking to those governing the Gaza Strip, even though Hamas won a majority in the Palestinian parliament in what was universally acknowledged as a free election. Though a public opinion poll published in the leading Israeli newspaper Haaretz showed that 64% of the Israeli population support direct negotiations between Israel and Hamas (while only 28% expressed opposition), Obama has chosen to side with the right-wing minority in opposing any such talks.

Furthermore, Obama insists that Hamas should have never been even allowed to participate in the Palestinian elections in the first place because of their extremist views, which fail to recognize Israel and acts of terrorism by its armed wing. Yet he has never objected to the Israelis allowing parties such as National Union — which defends attacks on Arab civilians and seeks to destroy any Palestinian national entity, and expel its Arab population — to participate in elections or hold high positions in government.

He insisted that Hamas uphold previous agreements by the Fatah-led Palestine Authority

with Israel, but did not insist that Israel uphold its previous agreements with the Palestine Authority, such as withdrawing from lands re-occupied in 2001 in violation of U.S.-guaranteed disengagement agreements.

In reference to Obama's speech, the anchor to Israel's Channel 2 News exclaimed that it was "reminiscent of the days of Menachem Begin's Likud" referring to the far right-wing Israeli party and its founder, a notorious terrorist from the 1940s who later became prime minister. By contrast, back in February, while still seeking liberal Democratic votes in the primaries, Obama had explicitly rejected the view which, in his words, identifies being pro-Israel with "adopting an unwaveringly pro-Likud view of Israel." Now that he has secured the nomination, however, he has appeared to have changed his tune.

Endorsing Israel's Annexation of Jerusalem Most disturbing was Obama's apparent support for Israel's illegal annexation of greater East Jerusalem, the Palestinian-populated sector of the city and surrounding villages that Israel seized along with the rest of the West Bank in June 1967.

The UN Security Council passed a series of resolutions (252, 267, 271, 298, 476 and 478) calling on Israel to rescind its annexation of greater East Jerusalem and to refrain from any unilateral action regarding its final status. Furthermore, due to the city's unresolved legal status dating from the 1948-49 Israeli war on independence, the international community refuses to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, with the United States and other governments maintaining their respective embassies in Tel Aviv.

Despite these longstanding internationally-recognized legal principles, Obama insisted in his speech before AIPAC that "Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided."

Given the city's significance to both populations, any sustainable peace agreement would need to recognize Jerusalem as the capital city for both Israel and Palestine. In addition to its religious significance for both Palestinian Christians and Palestinian Muslims, Jerusalem has long been the most important cultural, commercial, political, and educational center for Palestinians and has the largest Palestinian population of any city in the world. Furthermore, Israel's annexation of greater East Jerusalem and its planned annexation of surrounding settlement blocs would make a contiguous and economically viable Palestinian state impossible. Such a position, therefore, would necessarily preclude any peace agreement. This raises serious questions as to whether Obama really does support Israeli-Palestinian peace after all.

According to Uri Avneri, Obama's "declaration about Jerusalem breaks all bounds. It is no exaggeration to call it scandalous." Furthermore, says this prominent observer of Israeli politics, every Israeli government in recent years has recognized that calls for an undivided Jerusalem

"constitutes an insurmountable obstacle to any peace process. It has disappeared — quietly, almost secretly — from the arsenal of official slogans. Only the Israeli (and American-Jewish) Right sticks to it, and for the same reason: to smother at birth any chance for a peace that would necessitate the dismantling of the settlements."

Obama argued in his speech that the United States should not "force concessions" on Israel,

such as rescinding its annexation of Jerusalem, despite the series of UN Security Council resolutions explicitly calling on Israel do to so. While Obama insists that Iran, Syria, and other countries that reject U.S. hegemonic designs in the region should be forced to comply with UN Security Council resolutions, he apparently believes allied governments such as Israel are exempt.

Also disturbing about his statement was a willingness to “force concessions” on the Palestinians by pre-determining the outcome of one of the most sensitive issues in the negotiations. If, as widely interpreted, Obama was recognizing Israel’s illegal annexation of greater East Jerusalem, it appears that the incipient Democratic nominee — like the Bush administration — has shown contempt for the most basic premises of international law, which forbids any country from expanding its borders by force.

However, the Jerusalem Post reported that the Obama campaign, in an attempt to clarify his controversial statement, implied that the presumed Democratic presidential nominee was not actually ruling out Palestinian sovereignty over parts of Jerusalem and that “undivided” simply meant that “it’s not going to be divided by barbed wire and checkpoints as it was in 1948-1967.” The campaign also replied to the outcry from his speech by declaring that “Jerusalem is a final status issue, which means it has to be negotiated between the two parties’ as part of “an agreement that they both can live with.” This implies that Obama’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel does not necessarily preclude its Arab-populated eastern half becoming the capital of a future Palestinian state.

Israel, however, has shown little willingness to withdraw its administration and occupation forces from greater East Jerusalem voluntarily. Obama’s apparent reluctance to pressure Israel to do so makes it hard to imagine that he is really interested in securing a lasting peace agreement.

It Could Have Been Worse

Perhaps, as his campaign claims, Obama was not rejecting the idea of a shared co-capital of Jerusalem. And perhaps his emphasis on Israeli suffering relative to Palestinian suffering was simply a reflection of the sympathies of the audience he was addressing and was not indicative of anti-Arab racism. If so, the speech could have been a lot worse.

Indeed, Obama’s emphasis on peace, dialogue, and diplomacy is not what the decidedly militaristic audience at AIPAC normally hears from politicians who address them.

Obama did mention, albeit rather hurriedly, a single line about Israeli obligations, stating that Israel could “advance the cause of peace” by taking steps to “ease the freedom of Palestinians, improve economic conditions” and “refrain from building settlements.” This is more than either Hillary Clinton or John McCain was willing to say in their talks before the AIPAC convention. And, unlike the Bush administration, which last year successfully pressured Israel not to resume peace negotiations with Syria, Obama declared that his administration would never “block negotiations when Israel’s leaders decide that they may serve Israeli interests.”

Furthermore, earlier in his career, Obama took a more balanced perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, aligning himself with positions embraced by the Israeli peace camp and its American supporters. For example, during his unsuccessful campaign for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2000, Obama criticized the Clinton administration for its unconditional

support for the occupation and other Israeli policies and called for an even-handed approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He referred to the “cycle of violence” between Israelis and Palestinians, whereas most Democrats were insisting that it was a case of “Palestinian violence and the Israeli response.” He also made statements supporting a peace settlement along the lines of the 2003 Geneva Initiative and similar efforts by Israeli and Palestinian moderates.

Unlike any other major contenders for president this year or the past four election cycles, Obama at least has demonstrated in the recent past a more moderate and balanced perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As president, he may well be better than his AIPAC speech would indicate. Though the power of the “Israel Lobby” is often greatly exaggerated, it may be quite reasonable to suspect that pressure from well-funded right-wing American Zionist constituencies has influenced what Obama believes he can and cannot say. As an African-American whose father came from a Muslim family, he is under even more pressure than most candidates to avoid being labeled as “anti-Israel.”

Ironically, a strong case can be made that the right-wing militaristic policies he may feel forced to defend actually harm Israel’s legitimate long-term security interests.

A Political Necessity?

If indeed Obama took these hard-line positions during his AIPAC speech in order to seem more electable, it may be a serious mistake. Most liberal Democrats who gave blind support to the Israeli government in the 1960s and 1970s now have a far more even-handed view of the conflict, recognizing both Israeli and Palestinian rights and responsibilities. In addition, voters under 40 tend to take a far more critical view of unconditional U.S. support for Israeli policies than those of older generations. There is a clear generational shift among American Jews as well, with younger Jewish voters — although firmly supporting Israel’s right to exist in peace and security — largely opposing unconditional U.S. support for the occupation and colonization of Arab lands. The only major voting group that supports positions espoused by AIPAC are right-wing Christian fundamentalists, who tend to vote Republican anyway.

Furthermore, Obama has been far more dependent on large numbers of small donors from his grassroots base and less on the handful of wealthy donors affiliated with such special interest groups as AIPAC. This speech may have cost him large numbers of these smaller, progressive donors without gaining him much from the small numbers of larger, more conservative donors.

Indeed, there may not be a single policy issue where Obama’s liberal base differs from the candidate more than on Israel/Palestine. Not surprisingly, the Green Party and its likely nominee, former Georgia Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, along with independent candidate Ralph Nader, are both using this issue to gain support at the expense of Obama.

Only hours after his AIPAC speech, the Nader campaign sent out a strongly worded letter noting how, unlike Obama and McCain, Nader supports the Israeli and Palestinian peace movements and would change U.S. Middle East policy. The widely-circulated response to the speech makes the case that, in contrast to Obama, “Nader/Gonzalez stands on these issues with the majority of Israelis, Palestinians, Jewish-Americans and Arab Americans.”

Betraying the Jewish Community

Through a combination of deep-seated fear from centuries of anti-Semitic repression, manipulation by the United States and other Western powers, and self-serving actions by some of their own leaders, a right-wing minority of American Jews support influential organizations such as AIPAC to advocate militaristic policies that, while particularly tragic for the Palestinians and Lebanese, are ultimately bad for the United States and Israel as well. Obama's June 3 speech would have been the perfect time for Obama, while upholding his commitment to Israel's right to exist in peace and security, to challenge AIPAC's militarism and national chauvinism more directly. Unfortunately, while showing some independence of thought on Iran, he apparently felt the Palestinians were not as important

Taking a pro-Israel but anti-occupation position would have demonstrated that Obama was not just another pandering politician and that he recognized that a country's legitimate security needs were not enhanced by invasion, occupation, colonization and repression

"That truly would have been "change you can believe in."

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