

Obama at AIPAC: Some Doubts Eased, Others Created

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As is their wont, hard-line supporters of Israel have been pushing Barack Obama quite hard. He is, to them, an unknown commodity with questionable ties. Progressive Jewish opinion, on the other hand (and Arab Americans, as well), finds Obama appealing both because of his messages of hope and change and, specifically, because of comments he has made that indicate openness to a more nuanced discussion of Arab-Israeli peace-making. They latched on to, for example, comments he made to Jewish leaders in Cleveland on February 24th, where he appeared to reject identifying being pro-Israel with “adopting an unwaveringly pro-Likud view of Israel,” and his statement to a Jewish reporter that “in order to make progress in Arab-Israeli talks...both sides should be held accountable to previous agreements.”

There was, therefore, keen interest in how Barack Obama would address these concerns in his remarks before AIPAC’s policy conference today. For the most part, his speech pushed all the “right” buttons. It included a personal narrative that connected his story with that of the Jewish people, including his uncle’s role in the World War II liberation of a concentration camp at Buchenwald, and the larger narrative of the historic bonds between the African American and American Jewish communities based on a shared commitment to liberal values and forged in the American civil rights movement.

In addressing matters of foreign policy, the nub of the matter for AIPAC, Obama did his fair share of genuflecting and oath-taking, most of which is expected before an AIPAC audience that insists upon such displays. But, on the whole, Obama’s speech was less troubling than many others delivered before AIPAC, and contrasted favorably with the AIPAC “talking point” litany delivered one hour later by Senator Clinton.

He was properly tough on Iran, but correctly took on John McCain’s refusal to criticize the central role that the debacle in Iraq has played in destabilizing the Middle East while emboldening Iran and extremism. He repeatedly emphasized the need for principled diplomacy as the way to move forward. He smartly contrasted his commitment to peace-making with the neglect of the Bush administration by pledging active involvement in the search for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, and Israel and Syria, and noting the responsibilities of all parties in the Middle East to contribute to that process. He specifically called on Israel to “take appropriate steps — consistent with its security — to ease the freedom of movement for Palestinians, improve economic conditions in the West Bank, and to refrain from building new settlements.” He urged support for Palestinian President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad, and emphasized that “Palestinians need a state that is contiguous and cohesive, and that allows them to prosper.”

“Most Israelis and Palestinians want peace,” Obama noted, “we must strengthen their hand. The United States must be a strong and consistent partner in this process — not to force concession, but to help partners avoid stalemate and the kind of vacuums that are filled by violence.”

If he had stopped there, it might have been an acceptable speech to all sides, but he went further, including a deeply troubling reference to Jerusalem which he said “will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided.” Left unexplained, this was both unnecessarily provocative and contradictory. If the U.S. is not to “force concessions,” then why predetermine the status of Jerusalem, one of the more sensitive and complicated issues in the negotiations, in a speech to AIPAC? And if Palestinians need a state that is “contiguous,” “cohesive” and “prosperous,” how does that occur when one has cut the heart out of the center of the West Bank? (Note: it has been a Palestinian position that Jerusalem can “remain the capital of Israel” and can “remain undivided” as long as that does not preclude the Palestinians from also having their capital in a “shared” city.)

The AIPAC audience may have cheered, but Arabs, who called me from East Jerusalem, where they were watching the speech on TV, were deeply disheartened, as were Israeli peace activists with whom I spoke.

Better than McCain? Of course. More thoughtful than his predecessors? Clearly. But for those who have embraced Obama’s “change we can believe in” slogan, a few doubts have now crept in.

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View Comments: Newest First Oldest First HuffPost’s Picks Expand All Collapse All Page: 1 2 3 Next > Last » (3 pages total) - + DrRJP See Profile I’m a Fan of DrRJP “Palestinian” Arabs, or any other Arabs, for that matter, have no right to claim any part of Jerusalem. It is now, and has always been, for over 3,000 years, the capital of Israel. Mohammed personally detested Jerusalem, and bade his followers to pray towards Mecca. Jews pray towards Jerusalem. Jerusalem is not even mentioned in the Koran, whereas it is mentioned over 600 times in the Torah, the Jewish Bible, and “Old Testament” to Christians.

Before the middle of the 20th century, there was absolutely ZERO interest in making Jerusalem the capital of an independent Arab state.

No part of Jerusalem will ever be divided.

BTW, both Abbas and Nasrallah insist on making ALL of Jerusalem an Arab city.

Fat chance.

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