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Mr. Obama, on what planet do you live?

Obama looked "more interested in appealing to the folks in Washington" than to
Palestinians trapped in the West Bank.

Richard Falk

4/1/2013

It was master-crafted as an ingratiating speech by the world's most important leader talking on behalf of the government that has most unreservedly championed Israel's cause over the decades - enthusiastically received by the audience of mainly Israeli youth, and especially by liberal Jews around the world.

Despite the venue, President Obama's words in Jerusalem on March 21 seemed primarily intended to clear the air somewhat in Washington. Obama may now have a slightly better chance to succeed in his second legacy-building presidential term despite opposition from a deeply polarised US Congress.

Because the American economy continues to be in serious trouble, at least if assessed from the perspective of workers' distress rather than on the basis of robust corporate profits, Obama was also eager to avoid being distracted by any allegation that he was not giving Israel its proper due.

As for the speech itself, it possessed several redeeming features. It acknowledged that alongside Israeli security concerns, "the Palestinian people's right of self-determination, their right to justice must also be recognised". This affirmation was followed by the strongest assertion of all, to "put yourself in their shoes. Look at the world through their eyes."

To consider the realities of the conflict through Palestinian eyes, if taken seriously, would represent a true step toward some kind of balance, at least at the level of language, that is, leaving aside the one-sided material and diplomatic support given by Washington to Tel Aviv.

Seeing through Palestinian eyes confronts the ugly realities of prolonged occupation, annexationist settlement projects, the unlawful land-confiscating separation wall, generations of Palestinians confined to the misery of refugee camps and exile, second-class Palestinian citizenship, ethnic cleansing in Jerusalem, and a myriad of Kafkaesque regulations and checkpoints that make the daily life of Palestinians repetitive narratives of humiliation and frustration.

Of course, Obama did not dare to do this. None of these features of the Palestinian experience were made explicit, but left to the imagination of his Israeli audience.

Despite the failure to specify, Obama's injunction to see the conflict through the eyes of the other creates space for empathy and reconciliation. This is a necessary feature of according the weaker and oppressed side the sort of recognition that is a precondition to any genuine peace process.

Obama also encouraged in a helpful way Israeli citizen activism on behalf of a just peace based on two states for two peoples, although accompanied by several disturbing qualifiers.

Inappropriately, he urged that "for the moment, put aside the plans and process" by which this goal might be achieved, and "instead... build trust between people". Is this not an odd bit of advice?

It seems a stretch to stress trust when the structures and practice of occupation are for the Palestinians unremittingly cruel, exploitative and whittle away day after day at the attainability of a viable Palestinian state.

Given the undisguised outlook of the Netanyahu government, how can the Palestinians in their shackles be expected to embark upon a journey of trust?

Admittedly, this farfetched entreaty was somewhat softened by being coupled with a more plausible plea:

I can promise you this: Political leaders will never take risks if the people do not push them to take some risks. You must create the change that you want to see. Ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary things.

Possibly, there is some remote hope to be found in these inspirational words, but one has to wonder "to what end" given the present policies and programmes of the Tel Aviv government and the beleaguered circumstances of the fragmented and meekly represented Palestinian people.

Flaws in the speech

Beyond these observations, Obama's speech was deeply flawed in three fundamental respects:

1. By speaking only to Israeli youth, and not arranging a parallel talk in Ramallah to Palestinian youth, the role of the US as "dishonest broker" was brazenly confirmed. It also signalled to any attentive observer that the White House was more interested in appealing to the folks in Washington than to those Palestinians trapped in the West Bank and Gaza - an interpretation reinforced by laying a wreath at the **grave of Theodor Herzl** but refusing to do so at the tomb of Yasser Arafat.

This disparity of concern was further exhibited when Obama spoke of the children of Sderot in southern Israel: "The same age as my own daughters, who went to bed at night fearful that a rocket would land in their bedroom simply because of who they are and where they live."

To make such an observation without even mentioning the trauma-laden life of children on the other side of the border in Gaza, who have been living for years under conditions of blockade, violent incursions and total vulnerability year after year is to subscribe fully to the one-sided Israeli narrative as to the insecurity being experienced by the two peoples.

In all these respects, Obama did nothing to change his advance publicity that the trip was undertaken with the lowest of expectations with respect to any breakthrough in the relations between the parties.

2. By speaking about the possibility of peace based on the two state consensus, the old ideas, without mentioning developments that have made more and more people deeply skeptical about Israeli intentions is to lend credence to what seems more and more to be a delusionary approach to resolving the conflict. Dislodging 600,000-plus armed settlers seems more than even a left-leaning Israeli government would contemplate, must less the ardently pro-settler present leadership.

Such a crippling obstacle to a two-state solution needs to be linked with Obama's perverse injunction to the leaders of the Middle East, an appeal that seems willfully oblivious to the present set of circumstances makes the whole speech either hypocritical or completely out of touch: "Now's the time for the Arab world to take steps towards normalising relations with Israel."

How can now be the time, when just days earlier Binyamin Netanyahu announced the formation of the most right-wing, pro-settler government in the history of Israel, selecting a cabinet that is deeply dedicated to settlement expansion and resistant to the very idea of a genuine Palestinian state?

It should never be forgotten that when the Palestinian Liberation Organization announced back in 1988 that it was prepared to make a sustained peace with Israel on the basis of the 1967 borders, there was no reciprocal response despite more moderate Israeli leadership. By agreeing to such a self-limiting vision of self-determination, the Palestinians were making an extraordinary territorial concession that has never been reciprocated, and operationally repudiated year after year by continuous settlement building.

The unilateral Palestinian concession meant accepting a state limited to 22 percent of historic Palestine, or less than half of what the UN had proposed in its 1947 partition plan contained in GA Resolution 181, which at the time was seen as grossly unfair to the Palestinians and an illegitimate plan put forward without taking account of the wishes of the resident population.

To expect the Palestinians to be willing now to accept significantly less land than the 1967 borders to reach a resolution of the conflict seems highly unreasonable and probably not sustainable.

3. By endorsing the formula two states for two peoples was consigning the Palestinian minority in Israel to permanent second-class citizenship without even being worthy of mention as a human rights challenge facing the democratic Israel that Obama was celebrating.

As David Bromwich has pointed out ("**Tribalism in the Jerusalem speech**"), Obama was also endorsing a tribalism view of statehood that seems inconsistent with the promotion of human rights in a globalizing world. It also repudiates secularist assumptions that a legitimate state should never be exclusivist in either its religious or ethnic character.

Obama went out of his to affirm the core Zionist idea of a statist homeland where every Jew has unobstructed freedom to fully embrace his or her Jewishness:

"Israel is rooted not just in history and tradition, but also in a simple and profound idea: the idea that people deserve to be free in a land of their own."

And with embedded irony no mention was made of the absence of any Palestinian right of return even for those who were coerced in 1948 and again in 1967 to fleeing from homes and villages that had been family residences for countless generations. These coerced exoduses are known to the Palestinians for what they were, catastrophes, or in Arabic, the *nakba*.

Regressive approach

This regressive approach to identity and statehood espoused by Obama was also by implication misleadingly attributed to the Palestinians, being affirmed as a lesser entitlement. It is not correct to insist that the Palestinians want a state that is comparable to Israel. The Palestinians have no guiding ideology that is comparable to Zionism.

Their quest has been to recover rights under international law in the lands of their habitual residence, above all, the exercise of their inalienable right of self-determination in such a manner as to roll back the wider claims of settler colonialism that have been so grandiosely integral to the Greater Israel vision and practice of the Netanyahu government.

Indeed, Obama's speech was also an affront to many Israeli post-Zionists and secularists who do not embrace the idea of living in a hyper-nationalist state with pretensions of a religious endowment.

In my view, there are two conclusions to be drawn. Firstly, until the rhetoric of seeing the realities of the situation through Palestinian eyes is matched by a consideration of the specifics, there is created a mistaken impression that both sides hold equally the keys to peace, and both being fault to the same extent for being unwilling to use them. A false symmetry is presumed that overlooks the actually existing structure of domination and subjugation.

Secondly, it is a cruel distraction to urge a resumption of negotiations when Israel clearly lacks the political will to establish a viable and independent sovereign Palestinian state within 1967 borders and in circumstances in which the West Bank has been altered by continuous settlement expansion, settler only roads, the separation wall, and all the signs are suggesting that there is more of the same to come.

Making matters even worse, Israel is taking many steps to ensure that Jerusalem never becomes the capital of whatever Palestinian entity eventually emerges, which is a severe affront not only to Palestinians and Arabs, but to the 1.4 billion Muslims across the world - not to mention Christians.

In retrospect, worse than speech was the whole concept of the visit itself. Obama should never have undertaken such a visit without an accompanying willingness to treat the Palestinian reality with at least equal dignity to that of the Israeli reality and without some indication of how to imagine a just peace based on two states for two peoples given the outrageous continuing Israeli encroachments on occupied Palestinian territory that give every indication of permanence - not to mention the non-representation and collective punishment of the Gazan population of 1.5 million.

Obama made no mention of the wave of recent Palestinian hunger strikes or the degree to which Palestinians have shifted their tactics of resistance away from a reliance on armed struggle. It is perverse to heap praise on the oppressive occupier, ignore non-violent tactics of Palestinian resistance and the surge of global solidarity with the Palestinian struggle, and then hypocritically call on both peoples to move forward toward a peaceful resolution of conflict by building relations of trust with one another. Mr. Obama, on what planet are you living?