

Brilliant Rhetoric devoid of Political Substance

Netanyahu's Speech on Capitol Hill

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Benjamin Netanyahu's trip to Washington, particularly his speech before the US Congress on May 24th, had been eagerly anticipated for weeks. Would he deliver a speech that gave new impetus to the peace process with the Palestinians, perhaps even lead to a breakthrough? Prior to his departure to the US, in a speech before the Knesset on May 16th, Netanyahu had set out his positions with regard to the peace process and presented the political roadmap he would outline in Washington. The following five points summarize his basic positions: 1) Recognizing Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people; 2) A demilitarized Palestine with an Israeli military presence in the Jordan River Valley; 3) No right of return to Israel for Palestinian refugees; 4) No recognition of the 1967 borders and preservation of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank; 5) No division of Jerusalem. After this speech, it was plain to every observer that Netanyahu was not going to make substantial concessions in the peace process.

On May 19th, the day before Netanyahu's arrival, Barack Obama delivered his foreign policy keynote speech on the »Arab Spring« and the Middle East conflict. In it, he adopted a position that no other American president had ever held: Peace between Israel and the Palestinians should be based on the 1967 borders, in connection with mutually agreed exchanges of territory. Contrary to some expectations, Obama did not present a cohesive peace plan but he did undertake a change of course on one critical issue, thereby establishing a new point of departure for overcoming the stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. According to the new stance, the questions of the demarcation of borders (and with it, the settlement issue) and of security guarantees for Israel should be dealt with first, before addressing the two most complex and emotionally charged problems: the

right of return for Palestinian refugees and the status of Jerusalem.

Prior to his departure to the US, Netanyahu responded to Obama's speech with an uncommonly sharp statement. He rejected the American president's proposal as completely unacceptable, arguing that it would leave Israel's borders indefensible. Having arrived in Washington the following day, Netanyahu emphatically reiterated his criticism during a meeting with Obama at the White House. Referring to several thousand of years of Jewish history, to the Diaspora and persecution, Netanyahu said that a peace based on illusions was bound to lead to another catastrophe and that history would not give the Jewish people a second chance. He was evidently alluding to the Munich Agreement of 1938, which was followed by World War II and the Shoah.

In his critical attitude towards Obama, Netanyahu received overwhelming support from the Republicans, who also flatly rejected the president's new proposal. Obama was also criticized from within his own political camp, among others by the Democratic Senate Majority Leader, Harry Reid.

The Palestinians, too, were critical of Obama's speech. While his statement on the 1967 borders strengthens their position in the negotiation process, Obama firmly rejected the plan to have the Palestinian state recognized by the UN General Assembly in September. This plan, Obama believes, is doomed to failure. This led to great disappointment among Palestinians, who fear that, following the American lead, the Europeans, too, could withdraw their support for this initiative.

On May 22nd and 23rd, first Obama and then Netanyahu appeared before more than 10,000 delegates of the

influential American-Israeli lobby organization AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) in a kind of »speaking duel.« As a result of the fierce counter-reactions, Obama backpedaled to clarify his statement of three days earlier. The 1967 borders, he now said, must be the basis, but there cannot be a simple return to this line. Israelis and Palestinians must exchange territories by mutual agreement, first, to acknowledge the demographic realities on the ground (a reference to the Jewish settlements) and second, to take account of Israel's security interests. In his address to AIPAC, Netanyahu reiterated his criticism of Obama's stance in this forum, but also praised his firm and unreserved support for Israel.

Boiled down to their essence, the two leaders' opposing positions can be summarized as follows: Obama is convinced Israel must vacate the occupied Palestinian territories in order to guarantee its future as a Jewish and democratic state; for Netanyahu there is no doubt that Israel will be destroyed should it withdraw from the occupied territories.

The most important station of Netanyahu's sojourn in the US was his speech on Capitol Hill on May 24th. In this address, he exploited all of his political experience and his brilliant rhetorical skills in order to flatter Congress and President Obama and thank them for supporting Israel while at the same time not making a single concession to the Palestinians. His rejecting any compromise in the peace process, while at the same time strengthening Obama's status as close friend and ally of Israel, was a tactical and rhetorical master stroke.

Netanyahu was met with no fewer than 29 rounds of cheering applause from the members of both houses. This speech was the continuation of his Bar-Ilan speech of June 2009, when he first agreed to the two-state solution. Wrapped in new rhetoric, Netanyahu set out his already well-known positions and demands. Where in one sentence he said: »I am willing to make painful compromises to achieve this historic peace,« in another he declared: »Israel will not return to the indefensible lines of 1967« and »Jerusalem must never again be divided«.

In other words, his »speech of a lifetime« before the American Congress is another building block in Netanyahu's political strategy of uncompromising defense of the status quo. Part of that strategy is to put the entire blame for

the deadlock in the peace process on Mahmoud Abbas, since he was the one who decided against peace and for an agreement with Hamas. Netanyahu's main political goal is obviously to preserve his right-wing government coalition and thereby his own political existence. In this respect, this speech – a »no-speech« in terms of political substance – is already a brick in the road to the next elections in 2013.

But Obama, too, is already focusing on the upcoming elections in 2012. In the wake of Congress's reaction to Netanyahu's speech, he knows he is not in position to exert more political pressure on the Israeli prime minister without jeopardizing the support of his own party. Consequently, major initiatives should not be expected from him before Election Day. Since the beginning of his presidency, Obama has made intensive efforts to bring the conflict closer to a solution but nothing has come of it. The statements »It is up to the Israelis and the Palestinians to act« and »Peace cannot be forced upon them« are acknowledgements of his own failure. That explains why Obama's Middle East mediator, George Mitchell, has resigned from his post. So far, a successor has not been appointed.

There was no winner in the confrontation between Obama and Netanyahu. Neither of them could assert his position *vis-à-vis* the other. So what is the concrete outcome of this »speaking duel?« Certainly not progress in the peace process. Instead of talking with his Palestinian counterpart and looking for solutions, the Israeli prime minister prefers to deliver sparkling speeches in the US and to win the support of US politics and the American public for his course. Meanwhile, Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian leadership concentrate on the international community and the UN, with a view to obtaining support and endorsement for their politics. The bilateral relationship, however, is at a standstill. And as everyone in the Middle East knows, standstill is dangerous. In the absence of contact and dialogue, uncertainty and insecurity will increase and so will the escalation of the conflicts. Critical observers in Israel already see the indices of new military conflicts inherent in this development.

Netanyahu returned home from the US to significantly rising poll results that confirm his political course – 51 per cent support his policy against 36 per cent who reject it. He stood up to Obama and was not forced to make



any political concessions. He received the support of the American Congress. His government is stable. The Israeli public backs him more than ever. And he was able once more to put his strongest political challenger, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, at arm's length. But are those the objectives that will, in future, guarantee Israel's security and its existence as the state of the Jewish people? Or could Netanyahu's course lead to a repetition of what Michail Gorbachev was talking about in 1989, regarding the dramatic changes in the Socialist bloc at the time: »Life punishes those who come too late«?

New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman has apparently come to just that conclusion. He writes that Netanyahu is well on his way to becoming the Hosni Mubarak of the peace process. Mubarak let 30 years of governing go by, without championing reforms and democracy in his country. By the time he woke up and wanted to act, it was too late and his political career ended in disaster.

An exaggerated comparison? Perhaps. But it seems in no way exaggerated to conclude that time is running out for this particular political course as a means of ensuring that Israel remains a democratic state in which the Jewish people constitutes a majority. If a two-state solution does not come about, there will either be a bi-national state, in which Jews and Palestinians live together, or a state in which a Jewish minority rules over a Palestinian majority.

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