

Obama and Netanyahu: Round I

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Joint press conferences by political leaders after closed-door tête-à-têtes from which even the leaders' closest aides are excluded do not generally reveal all the details of the meeting itself. It is through that prism that the joint press conference held by US President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on May 18, 2009 must be seen. And yet, even while leaving much to speculation, the press conference did expose certain points of divergence, agreement and omission that warrant analysis.

Notably, two issues accounted for the lion's share of the press conference, and in all likelihood the meeting itself: Iran's burgeoning nuclear military potential and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

With respect to the Palestinian issue, clearly, the two leaders aimed their messages at two very different audiences and constituencies. President Obama was speaking to the international community, and especially to the Arab and Islamic world. Prime Minister Netanyahu, on the other hand, was addressing his coalition partners, particularly those on the far-right. While the president stressed that the goal of the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians should be the Two-State Solution, Netanyahu assiduously avoided any reference to it at all. The closest he did come to recognizing that formula was to say that Israel wants the Palestinians to govern themselves “absent a handful of powers that could endanger the State of Israel.” The president spoke of the Roadmap and Annapolis, which could indicate the percolation of a bridging formula when and if negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority resume. One must assume that Israel eventually could accept a recipe that would not rule out a Palestinian state as one of the possible outcomes of negotiations, but only provided Israel's vital interests would be protected. For the time being, Prime Minister Netanyahu returns to Israel claiming he did not make any concessions and that he did not deviate from any sacrosanct right-wing “party line.”

Both leaders chose to omit any reference to the Arab League's initiative of 2002. Clearly, Obama has reserved his acknowledgement, though not his endorsement, of that initiative for the statement he intends to deliver in Cairo on June 4, after this journal goes to press. At the moment, Israel can draw comfort from the absent reference to the initiative—but this may prove to be a very short respite.

Significantly, Obama did make an unambiguous appeal for a halt to Israeli settlement activity. One may draw the conclusion from Netanyahu's decision not to respond to that appeal nor to insist on at least the natural growth of existing settlements that he is willing to discuss aspects of the settlement issue with the US administration. This part of Obama's statement to the press on May 18, as well as the need to strengthen Palestinian leader Abu Mazen with the help of Israel, the Arab world and the international community, will most probably be at the core of Obama's message to the Islamic world on June 4.

Neither leader mentioned the Syrian–Israeli negotiation track. That omission may be best explained in terms of the linkage both parties see to the Iranian and Lebanese elections in June. In Washington's case, it can also be explained by American annoyance with Syria's continued assistance to subversive elements that attempt to infiltrate Iraqi territory.

President Obama's treatment of the Iranian issue was deft. No player, whether regional or international, could take issue with his measured, though tough, message. While demonstrating respect for Tehran, the American leader made it clear that Washington would not accept an Iran with nuclear weapons. He demonstrated steadfast willingness to conduct a dialogue with the Iranians, while making it abundantly clear that it would not be a limitless exchange. In a slightly different version of his predecessor's statement that "all options are on the table," Obama used the phrase "not foreclosing a range of steps"—though emphasizing the possibility of bolstering international sanctions. By the end of 2009, when the US assesses whether or not "significant benefits" resulted from its dialogue with Iran, differences of opinions in Israel and the US could emerge. At present, however, Israel has no real alternative to the line presented by Washington.

Netanyahu, for his part, made what seemed like a surprise concession to his American interlocutor. On linkage between the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, on the one hand, and the conduct of a dialogue with Iran, on the other, the Israeli leader spoke of simultaneous and parallel tracks. The use of such language could indicate that the prime minister assumes that the US–Iranian dialogue is bound to fail. Alternatively, he might believe that success in that dialogue will in any case create enormous pressure on Israel to make concessions to both Syria and the Palestinians in order to advance both tracks.

At least for now, Prime Minister Netanyahu can claim that he avoided a rift with Washington and that he held his coalition government together. Successive rounds of talks may prove to be a greater challenge of his abilities, especially if President Obama, in his June 4 message to the Islamic world, uses less ambiguous (or carefully couched) language on some of the issues he avoided in his meeting with the Israeli leader. It can only be hoped that both President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu agreed to consult each other personally in an effort to minimize the impact of divergent views and assessments, some of which were exposed during the press conference following their first encounter as leaders of their respective countries.

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