

Blaming Bibi, Ignoring Abbas

by Joseph S. Spoerl (April 2015)

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has come in for what the *New York Times* [calls](#) an “unusually forceful and public condemnation” by President Barack Obama for his pre-election statement on March 16 “that there would be no Palestinian state on his watch.” According to the *Times*, Obama thinks that Netanyahu’s statement “all but foreclosed the chance for negotiations to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”¹

Robert Satloff [has pointed out](#) that Obama chose to condemn Netanyahu without so much as calling him to ask what he meant by his comment. If Obama had done so, Netanyahu would have presumably told him what he told MSNBC’s Andrea Mitchell the very next day: “I don’t want a one-state solution; I want a sustainable, peaceful two-state solution, but for that, circumstances have to change.”² In particular, Netanyahu [had expressed](#) the legitimate concern that an Israeli withdrawal under current conditions could lead to the creation of a Hamas-controlled state in the West Bank, like the one in Gaza.³ A “Hamastan” on the West Bank would mean constant missile, rocket, and mortar attacks on the densely populated coastal plain of Israel from the highlands of Judea and Samaria – something the Israeli public would, and should, never tolerate.

What is most remarkable about Obama’s condemnation of Netanyahu for allegedly “undermining” the “two-state solution” is that it has not been paired with any equivalent condemnations of Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian Authority, who has made far more troubling comments that cast grave doubt on *his* commitment to the “two-state solution.”

Consider statements that Abbas has made on the so-called “right of return.” (By the “right of return,” he means the right of up to five or six million “registered Palestinian refugees”⁴ to return to Israel proper, which would make Jews a minority in an Arab-majority state – something to which no Israeli government could ever agree and thus a deal-breaker in peace negotiations).

On January 11, 2014, Abbas [told](#) a delegation of Arab visitors from East Jerusalem: “The Palestinian refugees’ right to return to the 1948 borders [i.e. Israel proper] is a personal right, like marriage. Each Palestinian will decide what he wants to do.”⁵ On March 7, 2014, Abbas [made](#) a similar statement to Palestinian students in Ramallah: “You are returning to the

state of Israel. After all, the refugees, numbered at five million, and their children, were all expelled from the 1948 territories [i.e. Israel proper]... If you want to return to Israel and receive an Israeli citizenship or not – you are free to decide.”⁶

On November 24, 2014, Abbas [told](#) an Egyptian newspaper: “We cannot recognize a Jewish state,” for two reasons: first, because this would mean abandoning the 1.5 million Arab Israelis, and secondly, because “there are six million [Palestinian] refugees who wish to return... we cannot close the door to those who wish to return.”⁷ In other words, Abbas knows that implementing the “right of return” for Palestinians is inconsistent with Israel remaining a Jewish state – and still he insists on the “right of return.”

Abbas has been making these sorts of statements for years. Only five days after the break-up of peace talks at Camp David, on July 30, 2000, Abbas [explained](#) the failure of the talks as follows: “We were not prepared to limit the number of refugees who would be allowed to return, even if they had proposed a number of three million refugees.”⁸ On Nov. 24, 2000 Abbas [reiterated](#) the point: “We made it clear to the Israelis...that the Right of Return means a return to Israel and not to the Palestinian state... because it is from there that [the Palestinians] were driven out and it is there that their property is found...”⁹

So far I have been quoting statements that Abbas has made to Arab and Palestinian audiences. To Western and Israeli audiences, however, Abbas often [conveys](#) a different message. For example, to a group of Israelis visiting Ramallah on Feb. 16, 2014, Abbas said the following: “There is propaganda that claims that Abu Mazen [i.e. Mahmoud Abbas] wants five million refugees to return to Israel in order to destroy it. This is baseless... we do not wish to flood Israel with millions and change its demographic makeup.”¹⁰ In his [speech](#) to the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 26, 2014, Abbas spoke merely of “a just and agreed upon solution to the plight of the Palestinian refugees on the basis of resolution 194.”¹¹ This sounds reasonable, unless one realizes that by a “just” solution he means one that gives every Palestinian “refugee” the right to decide whether to “return” to Israel. (Moreover, in this speech, Abbas twice stated his demand that the state of Palestine must have “East Jerusalem as its capital on the **entire** Palestinian territory occupied in the 1967 war” [emphasis added]– the word “entire” implying that Israel would have to give up the Western Wall and the Jewish Quarter of the old city of Jerusalem, which Abbas surely knows is a deal-breaker for any Israeli government.)

Abbas is not alone in insisting on the right of return. As a [recent study](#) shows,

The narrative of the Palestinian refugees' return is a central theme in the curricula of Palestinian Authority schools. This idea is inculcated through texts describing the refugees' desire and determination to return to their homes, including to homes inside of Israel, such as Haifa, Jaffa, Acre, Beit Shean, and Safed.¹²

The Israeli journalist David Bedein has produced recent documentaries showing that the "right of return" is central to the curriculum in [UNRWA schools](#) and [UNRWA summer camps](#) in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.¹³ (UNRWA is the United Nations agency that serves over five million registered Palestinian "refugees" in the Mideast.)

In fact, the "right of return" of the Palestinian "refugees" is central to Palestinian culture.¹⁴ A [recent report](#) by the International Crisis Group on the Palestinian "refugee problem" noted the following (based on extensive interviews in the West Bank and Gaza):

It is hard to overstate ... how commonplace it is for Palestinians outside the political and intellectual elites to say that no Palestinian leader could garner popular support for an agreement that does not give each refugee the choice of where to settle, including, without limitation, in Israel. No small number predicted violence should the leadership concede on this point.¹⁵

The threat of violence perhaps explains why "the perception that Palestinians would need to negotiate with Israel on the scope of refugee return, and that the outcome of such talks would need to be largely consistent with Israel's demographic realities, never translated into a Palestinian preparedness to renounce or otherwise abandon the right of return as a national principle."¹⁶ "For Palestinian leaders to do anything that smacks of abandoning refugees, and especially of renouncing their claims, is to cross a red line that touches at the core of national identity."¹⁷

We have not even mentioned the other half of the Palestinian government, that controlled by Hamas in the Gaza Strip, which is even more blunt than Abbas in its insistence on the "right of return" and the attendant destruction of the Jewish state of Israel. Hamas has [openly stated](#) that it will not be bound by any peace agreement signed by Mahmoud Abbas, even if, *per impossibile*, Abbas were ever to sign such an agreement.¹⁸ And what, one wonders, does Mahmoud Abbas think of Hamas' commitment to violent *jihad* against Israel and its genocidal anti-Semitism, as extreme as anything found in Nazi rhetoric¹⁹? On March 2, 2012, as mediators were trying to broker yet another reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas, an interviewer

asked Abbas if reconciliation could be possible unless one of the two parties changed its ideology. Abbas responded by [denying](#) that there are any ideological differences between his party, Fatah, and Hamas.²⁰

There are thus good reasons to doubt the sincerity of Mahmoud Abbas' commitment to the "two-state solution." Yet President Obama's one-sided criticism of Israel and of Benjamin Netanyahu over the past six years suggests that he only sees obstacles to peace on the Israeli side. If only the Israelis would pull out of the West Bank, peace would come to the Holy Land: this seems to sum up the thinking of the Obama White House and State Department (and of J Street). The unsolvable problem of the "right of return" of the "refugees" would remain, however, even under a different Israeli government, and even if, miraculously, all the Israeli settlements were pulled out of the West Bank tomorrow.

[1] Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Obama Says he Told Netanyahu That Campaign Talk Hurt the Peace Process," *The New York Times*, March 22, 2015, p. 13, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/world/middleeast/obama-says-he-told-netanyahu-that-campaign-talk-hurt-the-peace-process.html>.

[2] Robert Satloff, *New York Daily News*, "Save Obama and Netanyahu from Themselves," March 22, 2015, <http://m.nydailynews.com/opinion/robert-satloff-save-obama-netanyahu-article-1.2157407>.

[3] Recent opinion polls show high levels of support for Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza, exceeding that for Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah Party: Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, "Special Gaza War Poll," 2 September 2014, <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/special-gaza-war-poll>