

The Washington Post

Obama tells U.N. he sees ‘no shortcut’ to Israeli-Palestinian peace

Scott Wilson and William Branigin, Washington Post, 21 September 2011



Doug Mills/The New York Times

President Obama addressed the United Nations General Assembly on Wednesday.

UNITED NATIONS — President Obama on Wednesday hailed the popular revolutions that have transformed the political landscape of the Middle East and urged Israeli and Palestinian leaders to revive talks toward a difficult peace.

In the third address of his presidency to the U.N. General Assembly, Obama acknowledged that he is frustrated by lack of progress on Israeli-Palestinian peace, but he stressed that there is “no shortcut” to ending the conflict, and he called for understanding of each side’s “legitimate aspirations.”

Obama spoke ahead of a likely effort by the Palestinian Authority to seek U.N. recognition of a Palestinian state, an effort that the United States has vowed to veto in the U.N. Security Council, which must endorse the statehood bid before it goes to the General Assembly.

But Obama made no direct reference to a U.S. veto, instead making the case that a resolution of the conflict can come only through negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians.

Obama also called on the U.N. Security Council to impose sanctions on the Syrian government, which he accused of murdering, detaining and torturing thousands of opposition protesters. He spoke poetically about the anti-government revolutions that have ousted long-standing autocrats in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia since he last appeared before the General Assembly a year ago.

“Something is happening in our world,” Obama told the gathered heads of state, diplomats and others. “The way things have been is not the way they will be. The humiliating grip of corruption and tyranny is being pried open.”



Damon Winter/The New York Times

President Mahmoud Abbas listened as President Obama addressed the United Nations General Assembly.

But Obama noted that in places such as Syria, Iran and other nations facing citizen revolts, there is more work to be done to achieve the rights and freedoms he said were spreading in much of the world.

And he acknowledged that for much of his audience the Israeli-Palestinian conflict “stands as a test of these principles — and for American foreign policy.”

When he spoke last year here, Obama had only weeks before inaugurated a new round of direct negotiations between Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. But those talks collapsed soon after when Netanyahu declined to renew a politically difficult moratorium on Jewish settlement construction in the West Bank that he had imposed to meet a Palestinian condition for talks. The two sides have not negotiated since, and Abbas, frustrated by the lack of movement, has decided to seek U.N. recognition of a Palestinian state this month.

Recalling that he called for an independent Palestine when he addressed the U.N. General Assembly from the same podium a year ago, Obama said: “I know that many are frustrated by the lack of progress. I assure you, so am I. But the question isn’t the goal we seek. The question is how to reach it. And I am convinced that there is no shortcut to the end of a conflict that has endured for decades.”

He added: “Peace is hard work. Peace will not come through statements and resolutions at the U.N. If it were that easy, it would have been accomplished by now. Ultimately, it is Israelis and Palestinians who must live side by side. Ultimately, it is Israelis and Palestinians — not us — who must reach agreement on the issues that divide them: on borders and on security; on refugees and Jerusalem.”

Obama called for “compromise,” but stressed that “America’s commitment to Israel’s security is unshakable.” Noting that Israel “is surrounded by neighbors that have waged repeated wars against it,” he said, “friends of the Palestinians do them no favors by ignoring this truth, just

as friends of Israel must recognize the need to pursue a two-state solution with a secure Israel next to an independent Palestine.”

Obama described in detail Israel’s tenuous security situation in a part of the world where it is largely isolated and often under attack — diplomatically and, at times, militarily. And he reaffirmed the right of Palestinians to have an independent state and live in dignity.

“That truth — that each side has legitimate aspirations — is what makes peace so hard,” Obama said. “And the deadlock will only be broken when each side learns to stand in each other’s shoes. That’s what we should be encouraging.”

U.S. diplomats are working to round up enough votes against the Palestinian statehood resolution to make a U.S. veto unnecessary, although it remains unclear whether a majority of the 15-member council will oppose a bid that is backed by most U.N. members.

Abbas appears determined to submit the Palestinian membership application to Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on Friday. But diplomats note that ensuing diplomatic maneuvering within the Security Council could delay a vote on the proposal for days, weeks or longer.

White House advisers acknowledge the toll that the administration’s lack of progress in brokering an Israeli-Palestinian peace has taken on its regional standing.

Soon after taking office, Obama chose to deliver his appeal for “a new beginning” with the Muslim world in Cairo, emphasizing that the Arab Middle East was among his most important audiences.

Asked recently how the president’s Muslim outreach was faring, Ben Rhodes, the deputy national security adviser for strategic communications, said that while there has been progress in some Islamic countries, there remains a “continued challenge around public opinion in the Arab world.”

“I think the principal challenge has been the Israeli-Palestinian issue,” said Rhodes, adding that it is “not surprising given how important that issue is to people.”

Obama also used his address Wednesday to trace the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the beginning of a troop drawdown in Afghanistan, telling the audience that he has reduced by half the 180,000 U.S. soldiers deployed in those countries when he took office.

“So let there be no doubt: The tide of war is receding,” Obama said. “This is critical to the sovereignty of Iraq and Afghanistan, and to the strength of the United States as we build our nation at home.”

But his theme — that “peace is hard,” a phrase he repeated several times — gave his remarks a sharper edge than in the past, when he used his address to the General Assembly lay out the loftier aspirations of his foreign policy for the year ahead.

Touching on other topics in his speech Wednesday, Obama castigated Iran as a “government that refuses to recognize the rights of its own people” and blasted Syria for killing thousands of opposition demonstrators, while detaining and torturing many others. He praised the demonstrators and called on the U.N. Security Council to impose sanctions on the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

“The Syrian people have shown dignity and courage in their pursuit of justice — protesting peacefully, standing silently in the streets, dying for the same values that this institution is supposed to stand for,” Obama said. “The question for us is clear: Will we stand with the Syrian people, or with their oppressors?”

He said the United States already has imposed “strong sanctions” on Syria’s leaders and that many U.S. allies have joined in supporting a transfer of power in the country.

“But for the sake of Syria — and the peace and security of the world — we must speak with one voice,” he said. “There is no excuse for inaction. Now is the time for the United Nations Security Council to sanction the Syrian regime, and to stand with the Syrian people.”

After his address, Obama met with Netanyahu, who thanked the U.S. president “for standing with Israel and supporting peace.”

“I think this is a badge of honor, and I want to thank you for wearing that badge of honor,” Netanyahu said, referring to Obama’s vow to veto a Palestinian statehood bid.

Netanyahu, who has had a rocky relationship with Obama, said “you’ve also made it clear that the Palestinians deserve a peace, but it’s a state that has to make that peace with Israel.”

“I think the Palestinians want to achieve a state, but they’re not prepared yet to make peace with Israel,” Netanyahu said.

Meanwhile, at the General Assembly, French President Nicolas Sarkozy said leaders have “a moral and political obligation” to help resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He devoted his entire address to the issue, saying that “60 years without moving one inch forward — doesn’t it seem like time to do something new?”

Sarkozy warned that a Security Council rejection of a Palestinian state could provoke violence in the Middle East. Instead, he said, the General Assembly should grant “observer status” to the Palestinians, a step that a majority of the body appears to support, and set a one-year timeline for negotiations to achieve a peace agreement.

Obama has not endorsed that “intermediate step,” as Sarkozy characterized it. Obama is scheduled to meet both Sarkozy and Abbas later on Wednesday.