

# Answering Obama's UN Address

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During the Bush administration, I wrote more than a dozen annotated critiques of presidential speeches. I have refrained from doing so under President Barack Obama, however, because – despite a number of disappointments with his administration’s policies -- I found his speeches to be relatively reasonable. Although his September 21 address before the UN General Assembly contained a number of positive elements, in many ways it also contained many of the same kind of duplicitous and misleading statements one would have expected from his predecessor.

Below are some excerpts, followed by my comments.

*"War and conflict have been with us since the beginning of civilizations. But...the advance of modern weaponry [has] led to death on a staggering scale."*

Very true. Too bad the United States remains the world’s number-one exporter of weapons, ordnance, and delivery systems in the world, most of which are provided to autocratic regimes and other governments which have used these weapons against civilian populations. For example, after more than 800 civilians were killed by U.S.-armed Israeli forces in a three-week assault on crowded civilian neighborhoods in the Gaza Strip in early 2009, the Obama administration rebuffed [calls by Amnesty International](#) for an international arms embargo on both the Israeli government and Hamas by actually increasing unconditional military aid to Israel.

*"At the end of this year, America’s military operation in Iraq will be over. We will have a normal relationship with a sovereign nation that is a member of the community of nations. That equal partnership will be strengthened by our support for Iraq — for its government and for its security forces, for its people and for their aspirations."*

The repressive and autocratic Iraqi regime, dominated by sectarian Shi'ite political parties, will continue to be largely dependent on the United States, which maintains a sprawling embassy complex with thousands of employees in the heart of the Iraqi capital. The United States will continue to employ and direct tens of thousands of foreign mercenaries and others throughout the country even after the formal withdrawal of U.S. troops. This hardly constitutes an “equal partnership.”

*"One year ago, when we met here in New York, the prospect of a successful referendum in South Sudan was in doubt. But the international community overcame old divisions to support the agreement that had been negotiated to give South Sudan self-determination. And last summer, as a new flag went up in Juba, former soldiers laid down their arms, men and women wept with joy, and children finally knew the promise of looking to a future that they will shape."*

The successful referendum leading to the independence of South Sudan is indeed an impressive and positive achievement. By contrast, the United States (along with France) has blocked the UN from enforcing a series of Security Council resolutions calling for a referendum by the people of [Western Sahara](#) for self-determination, illegally occupied by Morocco since its 1975 invasion. This double standard is particularly striking given that the new nation of South Sudan emerged from what was universally recognized as Sudanese territory, whereas the UN recognizes Western Sahara as a non-self-governing territory.

## The Arab Spring

*"One year ago, the hopes of the people of Tunisia were suppressed. But they chose the dignity of peaceful protest over the rule of an iron fist. A vendor lit a spark that took his own life, but he ignited a movement. In a face of a crackdown, students spelled out the word "freedom." The balance of fear shifted from the ruler to those that he ruled. And now the people of Tunisia are preparing for elections that will move them one step closer to the democracy that they deserve."*

It's easy to praise a pro-democracy uprising after it has overthrown a dictator, but it should be remembered that the Obama administration was a strong supporter of the autocratic regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali almost to the very end. As the popular, largely nonviolent civil insurrection commenced in December, Congress approved an administration request for \$12 million in security assistance to Tunisia, one of only five foreign governments provided direct taxpayer-funded military aid in the appropriations bill. As protests increased in January and the Tunisian regime gunned down pro-democracy protesters, [Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed](#) her concern over the impact of the "unrest and instability" on the "very positive aspects of our relationship with Tunisia" and insisted that the United States was "not taking sides."

*"One year ago, Egypt had known one President for nearly 30 years. But for 18 days, the eyes of the world were glued to Tahrir Square, where Egyptians from all walks of life — men and women, young and old, Muslim and Christian — demanded their universal rights. We saw in those protesters the moral force of non-violence that has lit the world from Delhi to Warsaw, from Selma to South Africa — and we knew that change had come to Egypt and to the Arab world."*

Lauding the "moral force of non-violence" in the cause of freedom is significant, particularly coming from the president of a country that Martin Luther King – who led the Selma protests to which Obama referred – identified as the ["greatest purveyor of violence in the world."](#) Indeed, it is significant that a U.S. president would acknowledge the power of strategic nonviolent action, which has for so long been ignored in Washington and serves as a refreshing contrast to the previous administration, which argued that democracy could only be advanced in the Middle East through U.S.-led invasions.

However, it's important to remember that just one month prior to the Egyptian revolution, Obama and the then-Democratic Congress approved an additional \$1.3 billion in security assistance to help prop up Hosni Mubarak's repressive regime. Just days before the dictator's ouster, [Secretary of State Clinton](#) insisted that "the country was stable" and that the Mubarak government was "looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people," despite the miserable failure of the regime to do so for nearly 30 years in power. Asked whether the United States still supported Mubarak, [White House spokesman Robert Gibbs](#) said Egypt remains a "close and important ally." As during the Tunisian protests, the Obama administration tried to equate the scattered violence of some pro-democracy protesters with the far greater violence of the dictatorship's security forces, with Gibbs saying, "We continue to believe first and foremost that all of the parties should refrain from violence."

[In an interview with the BBC](#) in 2009 just prior to Obama's visit to Egypt, Justin Webb asked the president, "Do you regard President Mubarak as an authoritarian ruler?" Obama's reply was "No," insisting that, "I tend not to use labels for folks." Obama also refused to acknowledge Mubarak's authoritarianism on the grounds that, "I haven't met him," as if the question was in regard to the Egyptian dictator's personality rather than his well-documented intolerance of dissent. Referring to Mubarak as "a stalwart ally, in many respects, to the United States," Obama went on to insist that, "I think he has been a force for stability and good in the region."When the

BBC's Webb asked Obama how he planned to address the issue of the "thousands of political prisoners in Egypt," he replied that the United States should not try to impose its human rights values on other countries.

*"The measure of our success must be whether people can live in sustained freedom, dignity, and security. And the United Nations and its member states must do their part to support those basic aspirations. And we have more work to do."*

If President Obama really believes this, it makes it difficult to explain why he plans to veto a UN Security Council resolution recognizing the "basic aspirations" of the Palestinians for national self-determination.

*"Already, the United States has imposed strong sanctions on Syria's leaders. We supported a transfer of power that is responsive to the Syrian people. And many of our allies have joined in this effort. But for the sake of Syria — and the peace and security of the world — we must speak with one voice. There's 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."*

International sanctions against the Syrian dictatorship are indeed appropriate, and Obama is correct in calling for the Security Council to act. Unfortunately, the United States has little credibility in this regard, given its long history of blocking the UN from enforcing sanctions against allied regimes – including Indonesia (during its occupation of East Timor) and South Africa (when the then-apartheid regime was occupying Namibia) – and other countries that have, like the Syrian regime, massacred thousands of unarmed opponents.

*"Throughout the region, we will have to respond to the calls for change. In Yemen, men, women, and children gather by the thousands in towns and city squares every day with the hope that their determination and spilled blood will prevail over a corrupt system. America supports those aspirations. We must work with Yemen's neighbors and our partners around the world to seek a path that allows for a peaceful transition of power from President Saleh, and a movement to free and fair elections as soon as possible."*

This is a welcome change from Obama's previous support for the Saleh regime. Indeed, in his first two years of office, U.S. security assistance to the Saleh dictatorship increased five-fold from the Bush administration. Despite suspending U.S. support to the dictator's repressive security forces, however, Obama has refused to call for international sanctions, as he has with Syria.

*"In Bahrain, steps have been taken toward reform and accountability. We're pleased with that, but more is required. America is a close friend of Bahrain, and we will continue to call on the government and the main opposition bloc — the Wifaq — to pursue a meaningful dialogue that brings peaceful change that is responsive to the people. We believe the patriotism that binds Bahrainis together must be more powerful than the sectarian forces that would tear them apart. It will be hard, but it is possible."*

It has been Bahrain's government, controlled by the Sunni minority, not the pro-democracy opposition, which has been playing the sectarian card. And some key members of Obama's own administration, such as special advisor Dennis Ross, have disingenuously exaggerated Iranian support for the mostly (though not exclusively) Shi'a pro-democracy opposition movement.

Unfortunately, rather than advocating sanctions, as the president has done with Syria, the U.S. Defense Department announced just a week before Obama's speech a proposed sale of \$53 million of weapons and related equipment to Bahrain's repressive sectarian regime. [According to Maria McFarland](#), deputy Washington director at Human Rights Watch, "This is exactly the wrong move after Bahrain brutally suppressed protests and is carrying out a relentless campaign of retribution against its critics. It will be hard for people to take U.S.

statements about democracy and human rights in the Middle East seriously when, rather than hold its ally Bahrain to account, it appears to reward repression with new weapons.”

*"We believe that each nation must chart its own course to fulfill the aspirations of its people, and America does not expect to agree with every party or person who expresses themselves politically. But we will always stand up for the universal rights that were embraced by this Assembly. Those rights depend on elections that are free and fair; on governance that is transparent and accountable; respect for the rights of women and minorities; justice that is equal and fair. That is what our people deserve. Those are the elements of peace that can last."*

The nature of such universal rights is indeed in their universality. Unfortunately, the Obama administration seems to have embraced the same double standards of previous administrations in supporting human rights based more on a given government's relationship with the United States than its actual human rights record.

*"Moreover, the United States will continue to support those nations that transition to democracy — with greater trade and investment — so that freedom is followed by opportunity."*

Unfortunately, increased U.S. trade and investment has frequently taken place under a neo-liberal model that has actually lessened opportunities for small indigenous entrepreneurs and has harmed sustainable development practices. The result has been increased inequality and the enrichment of undemocratic elites at the expense of the poor majority.

*"We will pursue a deeper engagement with governments, but also with civil society — students and entrepreneurs, political parties and the press."*

Here and at a number of other points in his speech, Obama – to his credit – has emphasized the agency of ordinary people rather focusing exclusively on the role of states and international organizations. At the same time, his administration's continued support for autocratic regimes and occupation armies that suppress civil society raises serious questions regarding his commitment.

*"We have banned those who abuse human rights from traveling to our country. And we've sanctioned those who trample on human rights abroad. And we will always serve as a voice for those who've been silenced."*

The United States has taken such actions only with human rights abusers from countries that don't support U.S. policy. The Obama administration has been far more tolerant of human rights abusers from countries with which the United States is allied.

### **Palestinian Statehood and Middle East Peace**

*"One year ago, I stood at this podium and I called for an independent Palestine. I believed then, and I believe now, that the Palestinian people deserve a state of their own. But what I also said is that a genuine peace can only be realized between the Israelis and the Palestinians themselves. One year later, despite extensive efforts by America and others, the parties have not bridged their differences... It's well known to all of us here. Israelis must know that any agreement provides assurances for their security. Palestinians deserve to know the territorial basis of their state."*

Obama's stated support for the establishment of a Palestinian state based roughly on Israel's pre-1967 borders is far more explicit than that of any previous president, subjecting him to harsh criticism from both Republicans as well as a number of Congressional Democrats. However, given that the Palestine Authority has already "provided assurances" for Israel's security by agreeing to, as part of a final peace settlement, an internationally supervised disarming of any and all irregular militias, a demilitarization of their state, and the banning of hostile

forces from their territories, only to be met by Netanyahu's continued refusal to withdraw from the occupied territories, it raises questions as to why Obama implied that both sides needed to "bridge their differences."

*"Now, I know that many are frustrated by the lack of progress. I assure you, so am I. But the question isn't the goal that we seek — the question is how do we reach that goal. And I am convinced that there is no short cut to the end of a conflict that has endured for decades. Peace is hard work. Peace will not come through statements and resolutions at the United Nations — if it were that easy, it would have been accomplished by now."*

The main reason that UN resolutions have failed to resolve the conflict is that the United States has vetoed no less than 42 otherwise unanimous Security Council resolutions calling on Israel to live up to its international legal obligations and has blocked the enforcement of scores of other Security Council resolutions Washington allowed to pass.

*"Ultimately, it is the Israelis and the Palestinians — not us — who must reach agreement on the issues that divide them: on borders and on security, on refugees and Jerusalem."*

The UN Charter and international law has always put the impetus on the occupying power, not the country under occupation, in reaching an agreement on issues that divide them. UN Security Council resolution 242, long considered the basis of a peace settlement and cited in a number of subsequent resolutions, reiterates the illegality of any nation expanding its territory by force, yet Obama now insists that the two sides must "reach agreement" on that question. Similarly, UN Security Council resolutions 252, 267, 271, 298, 476, and 478 — passed without U.S. objections during both Democratic and Republican administrations — specifically call on Israel to rescind its annexation of Jerusalem and other efforts to alter the city's legal status. Yet Obama also now insists that occupied East Jerusalem be subjected to an "agreement" between the occupying power and those under occupation.

*"Ultimately, peace depends upon compromise among people who must live together long after our speeches are over, long after our votes have been tallied. ... And that is and will be the path to a Palestinian state — negotiations between the parties."*

Obama puts forward this false symmetry between Israel — by far the strongest military power in the region — and the weak Palestinian Authority, which governs only a tiny series of West Bank enclaves surrounded by Israeli occupation forces. The United States rejected calls for negotiations by Iraq when it occupied Kuwait and never insisted that Kuwaiti statehood could only be reclaimed through "negotiations between the parties."

*"We seek a future where Palestinians live in a sovereign state of their own, with no limit to what they can achieve. There's no question that the Palestinians have seen that vision delayed for too long. It is precisely because we believe so strongly in the aspirations of the Palestinian people that America has invested so much time and so much effort in the building of a Palestinian state, and the negotiations that can deliver a Palestinian state."*

In reality, the United States long opposed the establishment of a Palestinian state and did not formally endorse the idea until as recently as 2003. As far back as 1976, the United States vetoed a UN Security Council resolution calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the 22 percent of Palestine under Israeli occupation, which included strict security guarantees for Israel. Now Obama is preparing yet another veto to block Palestinian national aspirations.

*"But understand this as well: America's commitment to Israel's security is unshakeable. Our friendship with Israel is deep and enduring. And so we believe that any lasting peace must acknowledge the very real security concerns that Israel faces every single day.... The Jewish people have forged a successful state in their historic*

*homeland. Israel deserves recognition. It deserves normal relations with its neighbors. And friends of the Palestinians do them no favors by ignoring this truth."*

Israel would be far more secure behind internationally recognized and guaranteed borders than an archipelago of illegal settlements and military outposts amid a hostile population. The Palestinian Authority, backed by the entire Arab League, has already pledged security guarantees for, and full diplomatic relations with, Israel in return for its withdrawal from the occupied territories. If the United States really cares about Israeli security, it would force Israel's right-wing government to accept the reasonable proposals of "land for peace."

*"Each side has legitimate aspirations — and that's part of what makes peace so hard. And the deadlock will only be broken when each side learns to stand in the other's shoes; each side can see the world through the other's eyes. That's what we should be encouraging. That's what we should be promoting."*

The legitimate aspirations – for peace, security, and national self-determination – for both Israelis and Palestinians cannot be denied, and Obama is one of the first American presidents to even acknowledge that the Palestinians, and not just the Israelis, have such legitimate aspirations. Indeed, his potential Republican rivals in next year's presidential election have attacked him for such even-handedness.

However, even if one agrees that both peoples indeed have equal rights to such aspirations, the fact remains that Palestine remains occupied and Israel is the occupier. The Palestine Authority is only asking for 22 percent of historic Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza Strip), but the Israelis are insisting that that is too much. The right-wing Israeli government—backed by an overwhelming bipartisan majority of Congress—insists on annexing much of the West Bank in a manner that would leave a Palestinian "state" with only a series of tiny, non-contiguous cantons surrounded by Israel, much like the infamous Bantustans of apartheid South Africa. Obama, then, is putting forward a false symmetry in regard to a very asymmetrical power relationship.

*"This body — founded, as it was, out of the ashes of war and genocide, dedicated, as it is, to the dignity of every single person — must recognize the reality that is lived by both the Palestinians and the Israelis. The measure of our actions must always be whether they advance the right of Israeli and Palestinian children to live lives of peace and security and dignity and opportunity. And we will only succeed in that effort if we can encourage the parties to sit down, to listen to each other, and to understand each other's hopes and each other's fears. That is the project to which America is committed. There are no shortcuts. And that is what the United Nations should be focused on in the weeks and months to come."*

Unfortunately, in the more than 20 years since Palestinians and Israelis sat down and started listening to each other in negotiations, Israel has more than doubled the number of colonists in the occupied Palestinian territories in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, a series of UN Security Council resolutions, and a landmark 2004 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, all of which call on Israel to unconditionally withdraw from these settlements. The United States has pledged to veto any sanctions or other proposed actions by the United Nations to force Israel to live up to its international legal obligations.

Israel is also violating provisions of the Road Map, the Tenet Plan, the Mitchell Plan, and various other interim peace agreements that call for a freeze in additional settlements. Israel is continuing to expand these illegal settlements despite repeated objections from Washington, but Obama has steadfastly refused to condition any of the billions of dollars of U.S. aid to the rightist Israeli government to encourage them to stop. Given that Netanyahu has pledged to continue building these settlements on the very land the Palestinians need to establish a viable state regardless of negotiations, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has not surprisingly come to the conclusion that continued talks are pointless.

Obama's insistence that the UN not recognize a Palestinian state without Israel's agreement despite its recognition by more than 130 countries also reveals a double standard, given that the United States supported Israel's application for membership in the UN back in 1948 without demanding that it first sit down with the Palestinians and negotiate borders and other issues. More recently, the United States did not demand that Kosovo negotiate an agreement with the Serbs regarding its independence and has supported its membership in the UN, even though legally Kosovo is a province of Serbia, whereas the UN recognizes the West Bank as a territory under foreign belligerent occupation.

## **Nuclear Weapons**

*"America will continue to work for a ban on the testing of nuclear weapons and the production of fissile material needed to make them."*

This statement is ironic, given that the United States is one of only a handful of countries that has yet to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which was originally adopted more than 15 years ago.

*"And so we have begun to move in the right direction [on nuclear proliferation]. And the United States is committed to meeting our obligations. But even as we meet our obligations, we've strengthened the treaties and institutions that help stop the spread of these weapons."*

This is hardly the case. For example, as part of a 2006 nuclear cooperation agreement with India – one of only three states to refuse to sign the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT) – a bipartisan majority of Congress voted to amend the U.S. Non-Proliferation Act of 2000, which had banned the transfer of sensitive nuclear technology to any country that refuses to accept international monitoring of its nuclear facilities. The U.S.-Indian agreement also contravened the rules of the 40-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group, which had controlled the export of nuclear technology and to which the United States is a signatory. This agreement was itself a violation of the NPT, which had called on existing nuclear powers not to transfer nuclear know-how to non-signatory countries. So Obama is not being honest in claiming that the United States is committed to meeting its obligations or strengthening treaties and institutions to prevent further nuclear proliferation.

*"We must continue to hold accountable those nations that flout [non-proliferation treaties and obligations]. The Iranian government cannot demonstrate that its program is peaceful. It has not met its obligations and it rejects offers that would provide it with peaceful nuclear power. North Korea has yet to take concrete steps towards abandoning its weapons and continues belligerent action against the South. There's a future of greater opportunity for the people of these nations if their governments meet their international obligations. But if they continue down a path that is outside international law, they must be met with greater pressure and isolation. That is what our commitment to peace and security demands."*

The United States hardly believes that countries that refuse to meet their international legal obligations regarding nuclear non-proliferation should be "met with greater pressure and obligations." In addition to its nuclear cooperation treaty with India, the United States has blocked the UN Security Council from enforcing resolution 1172, which calls on India and Pakistan to eliminate their nuclear arsenals, and from enforcing resolution 487, which calls on Israel to place its nuclear facilities under the trusteeship of the International Atomic Energy Commission. The United States has also provided all three countries with nuclear-capable fighter aircraft. This comes despite the fact that although Iran merely "cannot demonstrate that its [nuclear] program is peaceful," India, Pakistan, and Israel actually possess dangerous nuclear arsenals and sophisticated delivery systems. In Obama's worldview, enforcement of international legal obligations regarding nuclear non-proliferation should not be universally enforced but instead only applied to governments the U.S. doesn't like.

## International Norms and Cooperation

*"To combat the poverty that punishes our children, we must act on the belief freedom from want is a basic human right."*

Ironically, the U.S. is the only country other than the failed state of Somalia that has refused to ratify the international Convention on the Rights of the Child, designed to protect the economic, social, and cultural rights of children.

*"To preserve our planet, we must not put off action that climate change demands. We have to tap the power of science to save those resources that are scarce. And together, we must continue our work to build on the progress made in Copenhagen and Cancun, so that all the major economies here today follow through on the commitments that were made."*

This is disingenuous in the extreme. The United States has joined China as the primary roadblock to meaningful action on the most serious threat to the planet today. Indeed, the United States is the only one of the 191 countries that signed the Kyoto Protocol to have failed to ratify it. In addition, according to [The Guardian](#), following the 2009 Copenhagen summit ending with only a non-binding statement by the United States and four other countries, "The immediate reason for the failure of the talks can be summarised in two words: Barack Obama." Regarding the subsequent Cancun summit in 2010, John Prescott, former British deputy prime minister and subsequently the Council of Europe's climate change rapporteur, noted how the United States ["shared the blame"](#) along with China "for the lack of a legally-binding deal."

*"And to make sure our societies reach their potential, we must allow our citizens to reach theirs. No country can afford the corruption that plagues the world like a cancer."*

The governments of Afghanistan and Iraq [are ranked by Transparency international as among the four most corrupt on the planet](#). Not only have thousands of Americans lost their lives and hundreds of billions of U.S. tax dollars been squandered supporting these regimes, they are totally dependent on the United States to stay in power. Given such leverage, it raises the question of whether the Obama administration is at all serious about fighting corruption.

*"No country should deny people their rights to freedom of speech and freedom of religion, but also no country should deny people their rights because of who they love, which is why we must stand up for the rights of gays and lesbians everywhere."*

Obama is the first president to so explicitly defend the rights of sexual minorities before the UN, and this is indeed positive. Unfortunately, the United States continues its close economic and strategic cooperation – including large-scale police and security assistance – with Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and (until recently) Yemen, in which homosexuality is grounds for execution, as well as Pakistan and other countries, where gays and lesbians can be sentenced to life in prison. It's questionable as to whether the Obama administration would maintain such close strategic relationships with countries that treated religious or ethnic minorities similarly.

*"And no country can realize its potential if half its population cannot reach theirs. This week, the United States signed a new Declaration on Women's Participation. Next year, we should each announce the steps we are taking to break down the economic and political barriers that stand in the way of women and girls. This is what our commitment to human progress demands."*

Also that week, close U.S. ally Saudi Arabia sentenced a woman to a public lashing for driving a car. Indeed, despite Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan remaining perhaps the most misogynist regimes on the planet, the Obama administration apparently has few qualms about close strategic cooperation with their security forces, which enforce such sexist laws.

*"Peace is hard, but we know that it is possible. So, together, let us be resolved to see that it is defined by our hopes and not by our fears. Together, let us make peace, but a peace, most importantly, that will last."*

One reason peace is so hard to attain is that the United States remains the world's number one exporter of arms, has vetoed more UN Security Council resolutions over the past 40 years than all other member states combined, has a military budget nearly as large as all the other nations in the world put together, and maintains military forces in over half the countries of the world. Until there is a change in the Obama administration's policies, the president has little credibility in preaching to the world about the importance of "peace."