

A Course Correction for President Obama

✖ Last week, President Obama gave a major speech in Cairo.

There he made a number of important points, including issuing a strong rejection of Holocaust denial in front of an audience that has been far too sympathetic to it. Yet while confronting this one myth, President Obama unfortunately helped to perpetuate two other dangerous myths concerning Israel's right to exist and the roots of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

This week Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave what was, at least in part, his response. In a major policy speech at Bar Ilan University, Netanyahu not only set out his proposal for peace in the Middle East, but he provided a quick and cogent rebuttal to the two myths President Obama appeared to embrace in Cairo. It was good that he did so.

The first myth is that Israel's right to exist is based upon Jewish persecution in Europe, namely the Holocaust. With a thinly veiled reference to Obama's words, Netanyahu clarified that; "The right of the Jewish People to a state in the Land of Israel does not arise from the series of disasters that befell the Jewish people over 2,000 years ... which reached its climax in the Holocaust." On the contrary, Netanyahu noted, "the right to establish our sovereign state here, in the Land of Israel, arises from one simple fact: Eretz Israel is the birthplace of the Jewish people."

This is a crucial point. The connection between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel dates back over 3,500 years. If the Jewish people had not been born in Israel, had not ruled Israel for centuries, had not returned to Israel consistently even after the Roman exile, and had not made Israel the center of their lives even while away, then they would have no right

to a state in this land. The Holocaust did not and could not confer territorial rights—it merely proved the urgency of exercising these rights.

The second myth Netanyahu confronted is that the Arab-Israeli conflict is driven by Israel's refusal to withdraw from the West Bank and recognize a Palestinian state. Netanyahu was quick to point out that those who take such a view confuse cause and effect. He noted that, "The attacks on us began in the 1920s, became an overall attack in 1948 when the state was declared, continued in the 1950s with the fedayeen attacks, and reached their climax in 1967 on the eve of the Six-Day War with the attempt to strangle Israel. All this happened nearly 50 years before a single Israeli soldier went into Judea and Samaria" (the Biblical name for the West Bank).

If Jewish rejection and occupation is not the source of the conflict, then what is? Netanyahu was quite clear on this point. He emphasized that when the United Nations proposed partitioning Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state back in 1947, "the entire Arab world rejected the proposal, while the Jewish community accepted it with great rejoicing and dancing. The Arabs refused any Jewish state whatsoever, with any borders whatsoever." Thus, Netanyahu concluded, "The simple truth is that the root of the conflict has been and remains the refusal to recognize the right of the Jewish people to its own state in its historical homeland."

In the part of the speech that received the most attention, Netanyahu endorsed a two-state solution to the conflict with the Palestinians. While this position may be new for Netanyahu, it is hardly new for Israel. Far from ending in 1947, support for a Palestinian state has been the official policy of Israel's recent governments. These governments have acted on this policy by withdrawing from all of Gaza and much of the West Bank—only to return to many West Bank towns to stop a wave of terrorism.

Yet Israel's support for a Palestinian state alone cannot bring peace because its absence has not been the primary barrier to peace. The root of the conflict has been and remains the Palestinian failure to accept—in both word and deed—the existence of a Jewish state within any border.

In his Bar Ilan speech, Prime Minister Netanyahu set forth an approach to the peace process that enjoys broad public support in Israel. And he has taken a position that recognizes and seeks to surmount the real barriers to a negotiated settlement. Let us hope that our government will respect this Israeli consensus, and recognize this historical reality, as it continues to pursue peace in the Middle East.