

OBAMA'S AIPAC SPEECH RILES PALESTINIANS

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By Lawahez Jabari, NBC News Producer

Sen. Barack Obama's speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) on Wednesday shocked many Palestinians, who had hoped he would be a sympathetic advocate for the Palestinian cause in the White House.

Ayman abu Syrieh, 45, owns a grocery store in the Old City of East Jerusalem and has been following the campaign on a daily basis. "Every time Obama was on TV, I asked everyone to be quiet, so I could listen to him," Syrieh said. "When he was talking, he represented hope for me and I believed that he would be the one to bring real peace between Palestinians and Israelis."

But Syrieh's feelings changed after Obama stressed his support for Israel in the AIPAC speech.

"We were looking at him differently, from Bush and the others," Syrieh, the grocer said. "We thought he would bring real peace to the Middle East. I have to be honest with you, I am shocked now."

Throughout Obama's run for the Democratic nomination, the sentiment toward him has been extremely warm on the streets of Gaza, the West Bank, and east Jerusalem. Many Palestinians see him as charismatic. They believe that because he is African-American, he knows what it is like to be discriminated against, has empathy for the Palestinians plight, and therefore will be more balanced in peace negotiations than they think past presidents have been.

Many Palestinians like to cite a comment Obama made to a small group of Democratic activists in Muscatine, Iowa, early in the campaign: ["Nobody is suffering more than the Palestinian people." The comments drew fire in the United States, particularly from supporters of AIPAC, but were not forgotten among Palestinians.](#)

[Obama later clarified in a presidential debate that his remark was actually an indictment of the Palestinian leadership that he believes has caused much of the Palestinians' suffering.](#)

Nimer Hammad, spokesman for Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, said he was not surprised by the AIPAC speech. "Anyone participating in Jewish conferences in America tries to be more a Likud member than Likud members themselves," Hammad was quoted as saying in the Arab press. Likud is the major center-right political party in Israel.



[**VIDEO: Former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski discusses Obama's speech at AIPAC and Mideast politics**](#)

terrorist organization by the United States. Hamas, in the past, has expressed support for Obama – support that Obama has rejected.

"We must isolate Hamas unless they renounce terrorism, recognize Israel's right to exist and abide by past agreements," Obama said yesterday, basically echoing the demands of the Mideast Quartet – the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations – which are involved in mediating the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. "There is no room for terrorist organizations," Obama added.

Hamas didn't appreciate Obama's comment. "It will show that the two parties are supporting occupation at the expense of the Palestinian people," Sami Abu Zuhri, Hamas' spokesman in Gaza, said.

The Israeli press, on the other hand, welcomed Obama's seemingly full-throated support. Ma'ariv, a popular Hebrew daily newspaper in Israel, ran a frontpage headline calling Obama's speech an "embrace" of Israel.

And Israel's Channel 2 broadcast noted that Obama's statement that "Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel and it must remain undivided," even exceeds what most current Israeli leaders would say. The statement is something "reminiscent of the days of Menachem Begin's Likud!" said Channel 2's anchor, referring to one of the founding fathers of the state of Israel.

Mahdi Adel-Hadi, a Palestinian political analyst, told NBC News on Thursday that Palestinians should be pragmatic and understand the circumstances in which Obama spoke before judging his words.

And Abbas himself was highly critical of Obama comments and reiterated that Palestinians would not accept a Palestinian state without Jerusalem as its capital. "This is totally rejected and Jerusalem is one of the six items on our agenda," Abbas told reporters in Ramallah. "The entire world knows very well that East Jerusalem (Arab Jerusalem) was occupied in 1967 and we will not accept a Palestinian state without having Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state."

Obama's speech to AIPAC on Wednesday was a disappointment, if not a shock, to Hamas, a group considered a

"Remember this is a campaign speech, and he's addressing the most powerful American Jewish lobby. Also, the Democratic nominee has to follow the lines of the party's position," said Adel-Hadi.

"Those in the Arab world who condemn him are short-sighted, and it is too early to come with strong reactions," Adel-Hadi said. "Obama needs to keep the party under his leadership and can't leave room for anyone to doubt his integrity, which could weaken his challenge to McCain."

Asma'a, 23, a student who lives in Wadialjoz, a neighborhood in Jerusalem and works part-time as a social worker, said she is a fan of Obama, but was disappointed by his comments about Jerusalem, which seemed to exclude Palestinians from the future of the city.

"How can he talk about the Palestinian state all the time, and suddenly he says Jerusalem is the capital of Israel? Where is the capital of the Palestinian state?" said Asma'a, who asked not to use her last name.