

Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

Obama's Hardball Public Diplomacy ^[1]

President Barack Obama's relationship with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has never been warm. So while visiting Israel, Obama did not limit himself to the standard rhetorical niceties. He went over the heads of politicians and appealed directly to the Israeli public, especially the young, to make his case for a more flexible approach to negotiating with Palestinians.

This is a good example of public diplomacy: reaching out directly to people rather than connecting with them through their government. In this case it was to apply heat to Israel's often intransigent political leaders. In his March 21st speech in Jerusalem to a largely college-age audience, Obama said that those leaders "will never take risks if the people do not push them to take some risks. You must create the change that you want to see. Ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary things."

Netanyahu might not appreciate an American president involving himself in Israel's domestic politics in this way, but this is the kind of hardball public diplomacy that is becoming more common in international affairs. With the ability to receive information from a huge number of sources, ranging from satellite television to social media, publics around the world are accessible as never before. They expect to be spoken to, and not solely through their governments. These publics also increasingly assume that they have a "right to reply," and that they will be listened to. (During the past several days, social media have offered plenty of commentary about Obama's speech.)

Although it appears that Obama fared well among many Israelis with this exercise in public diplomacy, risks accompany this kind of outreach. After the President's speech in Cairo in 2009, which was directed to the Muslim world and in which he raised Palestinians' hopes for American support, there was a bitter letdown when U.S. policy did not match the speech's rhetoric.

In the Jerusalem speech, Obama stressed the need for "an independent and viable Palestine" and said, "Just as Israelis built a state in their homeland, Palestinians have a right to be free people in their own land." By this time, Palestinians may be so cynical that they won't put much faith in Obama's pronouncements, but those who do are likely to be disappointed. No evidence exists that Netanyahu has been affected by Obama's views about this issue (or about much of anything else), and so once again the words of a beautifully written speech may soar briefly and then flutter to earth, lacking substantive policy to support them.

That is the peril of public diplomacy. When professional diplomats talk to each other, they do not let their hopes rise inordinately; they are hardened realists, forever skeptical. But when global publics are included in the diplomatic process, they are more likely to set aside their doubts. When these publics' hopes, like the politicians' words, come crashing to earth,

diplomacy suffers a setback.

This is not to say that public diplomacy should be set aside. Rather, those who wield this valuable foreign policy tool simply need to be sophisticated enough to realize that engagement must be built upon a foundation of policy.

Another Obama speech in Israel, at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial, received less media attention but addressed the same issue of public assertiveness that the President had raised earlier. "Here," he said, "we learn that we are never powerless." That is a core tenet of public diplomacy as well as of democracy, and that is the ideal that can only be made real through policies that back up fine words.
