

# How Would Palestinians React to a UNSC Parameters Resolution?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**If Washington and other parties hope to enshrine the contours of future peacemaking through a Security Council resolution, they will need to overcome numerous obstacles relating to Palestinian politics, regional priorities, and America's diminished standing in the region.**

**S**ince the collapse of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations in April 2014, U.S. officials have been careful not to rule out the possibility of publicly spelling out the outlines of a peace deal through a presidential speech or UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution. And the idea of providing such an outline, commonly referred to in peace process parlance as "parameters," is not exclusively American. European diplomats, most vociferously the French, have spoken of it often, as have the Palestinians.

The main logic behind the idea is that, at a time when the parties themselves are unable to reach a deal -- indeed, when the very notion of a two-state solution to the conflict is rapidly losing ground -- such parameters would preserve the two-state concept and create a diplomatic reference point for the resumption of negotiations when times are more opportune. Specifically, they would lay out formulas to guide future resolution of the thorniest issues, calling for measures such as the division of Jerusalem, a nonmilitarized Palestinian state along the 1967 lines, equitable land swaps to compensate for Israeli annexation of certain settlements, the right of Palestinian refugees to move to the Palestinian state but not Israel, and some form of recognition for Israel's Jewish character.

If a new UNSC resolution were the vehicle used to enshrine these parameters, it could become the definitive peace document in much the same way that Resolution 242 served as the basis for future peace initiatives. Despite this praiseworthy objective, however, any UNSC-based approach faces practical obstacles that could not only thwart the effort, but even produce results contrary to the stated intentions. Israel has consistently opposed both the concept of

an imposed UNSC solution and many of the specifics, particularly those relating to Jerusalem and borders, so bringing the Israelis along would present its own set of challenges. But dealing with the Palestinian reaction would not be simple either.

## PALESTINIAN OBSTACLES

**A**lthough Palestinian officials have repeatedly demanded a UNSC parameters resolution, they want this resolution to wholly reflect their positions. December 2014 offers a telling example of how they would likely react to such a proposal. After the collapse of bilateral negotiations led by Secretary of State John Kerry, the Palestine Liberation Organization sought to put forward a parameters resolution, but to do so they had to go through Jordan, the lone Arab UNSC member at that time. In order to garner the minimum nine votes necessary to pass such a resolution -- assuming none of the permanent council members exercised their veto power -- the Jordanians embarked on drafting a balanced resolution that reflected sensitivity to Palestinian positions but also incorporated legitimate Israeli positions. Yet the Palestinians were uncomfortable with the latter elements and insisted on a maximalist draft, which the Jordanians, to their chagrin, felt compelled to submit. Unsurprisingly, the resolution failed to gain nine votes.

To understand this behavior, one must realize that the Palestinians had taken the UNSC route primarily for domestic political reasons, not diplomatic reasons. After the bilateral negotiations collapsed, Palestinian leaders were left with nothing to offer their public on the diplomatic front, having already exhausted their prior campaign to gain admittance into UN agencies. They needed to be seen as doing something, but the erosion of their domestic standing deprived them of the political cachet needed to make significant compromises. Thus, submitting a resolution was the primary objective, not passing it. Accepting anything short of a resolution that faithfully mirrored Palestinian positions would have left the leadership vulnerable to domestic opponents.

The Palestinian political scene has only grown more brittle since then. The public's faith in diplomacy has plummeted, and the Palestinian Authority's domestic standing and ability to compromise have further eroded. In addition, recent polls show that around two-thirds of Palestinians believe President Mahmoud Abbas should resign, bringing the question of succession to the fore. That once-taboo topic is now commonly discussed in public and private, and many senior Palestinian politicians are already positioning themselves for the day after Abbas.

If a compromise-based parameters resolution were submitted under such circumstances, it is difficult to imagine any Palestinian politician confronting the inevitably negative public reaction, or any presidential aspirant wanting to be seen as endorsing it. More likely, they would compete in rhetorical one-upmanship to show their opposition to every component of these parameters, particularly regarding refugees and recognition of Israel's Jewish character. Instead of reigniting discussion of a two-state solution and arming the peace camp with new arguments, issuing parameters now would probably cement the negative, uncompromising trends in the internal Palestinian debate.

## INTERNATIONAL OBSTACLES

**S**ome observers contend that the two parties need not endorse a UNSC resolution. On the contrary, the argument goes, Israeli and Palestinian protests would indicate that they had been confronted with the necessary set of painful compromises. For this approach to be meaningful, however, the parties would need to be confronted not only with balanced parameters, but also with solid and wide international consensus on a two-state solution, mainly to ensure that Israeli and Palestinian objections do not spill over and color the reaction of others, particularly but not only the Arab states.

Indeed, it can safely be assumed that the Palestinians would lobby Arab states, as well as European and other states, to join them in rejecting any parameters that do not meet their current maximalist standards. And if they successfully mobilized such support, they could trigger a very negative chain of events. For example, instead of

reaffirming consensus around the contours of Palestinian-Israeli peace, the parameters might instead expose rifts within the international community and endanger the already battered two-state paradigm. This would be particularly damaging if the Palestinians convinced their supporters to modify the resolution's text in such a way as to force a U.S. veto.

In addition, the Palestinians would likely bring the matter to the Arab League, at a time when relations between that body's members are so problematic that this year's Arab Summit had to be canceled. Under such circumstances, some member states could decide to question and reopen the Arab Peace Initiative, effectively destroying Arab consensus on the two-state solution and dealing a significant blow to the prospects of that solution coming to pass.

Building a solid Arab and international front in support of peace parameters would therefore require two elements. First, the substance of the parameters should clearly reflect the difficult compromises that both sides need to make, including on contentious issues such as abandoning the right of return, accepting the division of Jerusalem, delineating borders along the 1967 lines with equal land swaps, and recognizing Israel's Jewish character. Past discussions in the UN and the Quartet have demonstrated that there is no international consensus yet on these issues.

Second, the United States would need to have the political credit to convince others, particularly Arab countries, to expend their own political capital on supporting controversial parameters and bringing the Palestinians along -- or at least convincing them to moderate the tone of their response. For both the 1991 Madrid peace conference and the 2007 Annapolis conference, three factors greatly facilitated the creation of such coalitions: (1) the peace process was a top Arab priority, (2) Arab states regarded U.S. engagement in peacemaking as partial compensation for the invasion of Iraq (and in the case of Madrid, this was coupled with a sense of gratitude for the liberation of Kuwait), and (3) Arab leaders were in no doubt that the United States was the sole international and regional leader, and that it was willing to exercise this leadership. In today's world, Washington would be hard-pressed to find Arab leaders who consider the Palestinian issue a priority worth expending political capital on, or who view the United States with gratitude, fear, or faith in its regional leadership.

## CONCLUSION

In short, numerous elements relating to Palestinian politics, regional priorities, and America's standing in the region -- not to mention a bevy of Israeli political and diplomatic factors not discussed here -- raise serious challenges to the idea of proposing U.S. or UNSC parameters for Palestinian-Israeli peace. If these challenges are not addressed properly, a parameters resolution could backfire, feeding the Palestinian public's already dangerous skepticism about the feasibility of diplomacy, encouraging more hardline rhetoric among their leaders, and eroding regional and international support for a two-state solution. Instead of giving future leaders a solid international agreement on two-state contours and generating vibrant, healthy debate among Palestinians, an unbalanced resolution -- or one issued without intensive prior consultation with major global stakeholders -- could shatter international consensus and drive the parties even further away from ending the conflict.

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