

Mahmoud Abbas's Bombshell Fizzles

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His alarmist declarations at the UN won't make a Palestinian state more likely, but now would be an ideal time to quietly probe key Arab and Israeli leaders on whether their converging regional fears can be used to address the Palestinian issue.

Last week, before going to New York to address the United Nations General Assembly, the president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, declared that he would drop a bombshell in his speech. The much-awaited line, delivered Wednesday, was this: "We cannot continue to be bound by these signed agreements," by which he meant the Oslo Accords, "and Israel must assume fully all its responsibility as an occupying power."

These sound like strong words, but what do they actually mean? Did Mr. Abbas mean that he intended to dismantle the Palestinian Authority, the entity set up by the Gaza-Jericho agreement of 1994? Did he mean that the Paris Economic Protocol, which provides for Israel to collect the taxes on imports to the Palestinian territories and provide them to the Authority, would now lapse? Did he mean that security cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli security forces would stop?

Don't count on it. It is one thing to say "we will not be bound by these agreements," and another thing actually to stop implementing them, particularly when the Palestinian Authority is by far the largest employer in the West Bank. With roughly 70 percent of the Authority's budget coming from the taxes that the Israelis collect, there will be no rush to end the economic protocol. (Every time Israel withholds these funds, it creates a financial crisis in the territories.) And given that Mr. Abbas constantly emphasizes his opposition to violence, he is unlikely to end security cooperation.

Why, then, did he make this statement? Mr. Abbas knows that Palestinians are extremely frustrated. Despite the new flag flying outside the United Nations this week, there is no real movement toward statehood. The Israeli occupation seems unlikely to end, and Palestinians see no obvious path for pursuing their national aspirations.

Moreover, the West Bank and Gaza are split between two different governing authorities, with Mr. Abbas's Fatah movement running the West Bank, and Hamas in control of Gaza. Every reconciliation agreement between the two groups has failed. And there has been no presidential election since 2005, and no legislative elections since 2006, eroding the legitimacy of Fatah and Hamas leaders alike.

To make matters worse, the outside world is preoccupied with the Islamic State, the Syrian civil war, the refugees flooding Europe and the war in Yemen -- everything but the Palestinians. Neither President Obama nor Russia's president, Vladimir V. Putin, addressed the Palestinian conflict in their United Nations speeches, and regional leaders barely touched on it.

The great achievement of the Palestinian leader and the first president of the Authority, Yasir Arafat, who died in 2004, was twofold: He unified the Palestinian movement, and he won recognition and acceptance of the Palestinian cause on the international stage. In contrast, Mr. Abbas today has little public support and no clear strategy. His preference for taking the conflict to the United Nations rather than negotiating with Israel has achieved the recognition of Palestine as a "nonmember" state, a flag on Dag Hammarskjold Plaza and the possibility of taking Israel to the International Criminal Court. But none of these makes actual Palestinian statehood likely. Even if the Palestinian national movement has historically placed great weight on symbols, the Palestinian public understands the stark reality of their condition.

Faced with such a grim diplomatic landscape, Mr. Abbas felt the need to do something -- so he made his dramatic speech. Then, on Thursday, the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, responded by telling the General Assembly, "I am prepared to immediately resume direct negotiations with the Palestinian Authority without any preconditions whatsoever." Unfortunately, Mr. Netanyahu's appeal will fall on deaf ears because Mr. Abbas doubts that Israel's narrow right-wing government can negotiate anything, and he doesn't feel politically capable himself of making the necessary compromises on the Palestinian side.

Instead, Mr. Abbas makes do with statements he hopes will alarm the United States, Europe and others so that they feel the need to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But with so many other challenges in the region, no major initiative focused on the Palestinians is likely anytime soon.

Mr. Abbas's bombshell at the United Nations may not amount to much, but it does remind us that ignoring the conflict won't make it go away. Now would be an ideal time to hold discussions with key Arab and Israeli leaders and quietly probe whether the convergence of their fears about Iran and radical Islamist threats could be used to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Because the Palestinian leadership is weak and Israel doubts that Mr. Abbas can deliver anything, this is also a good time for the leaders of Arab states to assume a larger role in the negotiations. Mr. Abbas might even be relieved to know that others would take on key responsibilities for him. Since Mr. Netanyahu has highlighted the regional threats bringing Israel and its Arab neighbors closer together, it is worth testing this possibility.

Much will depend on whether the Egyptians, Jordanians, Saudis and others have either the capacity or the interest to deal with the Palestinian issue at the moment. These neighboring countries will be the key to any negotiated outcome. As one Palestinian told me recently, if Mr. Abbas could not even gain the support necessary to hold a Palestinian National Council meeting to consolidate his position, or to pave the way for his exit, how could he even consider making historic decisions on his own to resolve the conflict?

Israel will never make serious concessions to the Palestinians unless it gains real benefits from the Arab states: open cooperation in dealing with common threats, integration into the region economically, and normalizing diplomatic and commercial ties. And Mr. Abbas cannot contemplate compromise with the Israelis unless the Arabs assume responsibility for those concessions.

Mr. Abbas's alarmist declarations at the United Nations won't make a Palestinian state more likely. But two things might: building institutions and a rule of law in the Palestinian Authority and having key Arab states assume a greater role in negotiating an outcome.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, and author of the forthcoming book Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama. ❖

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