

# Abbas at the UN: A Listener's Guide

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Brief Analysis

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**This Friday's speech can set the stage for future peace efforts, but only if it keeps the door open for diplomacy and avoids trying to delegitimize Israel or threatening it with legal action.**

**O**n September 26, President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority will deliver his annual address to the UN General Assembly in New York. Since his previous such speech last year, and especially in the past few months, many things have changed in the Israeli-Palestinian and broader Middle Eastern arenas: the peace talks with Israel collapsed, the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement was signed, conflict erupted in Gaza, and, most recently, an acute threat arose from the so-called "Islamic State," or ISIS. Although the world's attention has rapidly shifted away from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and toward the new regional war against ISIS, Abbas's speech nevertheless merits some notice as a harbinger of future developments.

## WHAT TO SAY, WHAT NOT TO SAY

**A**bbas has a tricky balancing act to perform. To judge from his latest statements and other clues, he will attempt to combine a plea for a three-year, international diplomatic deadline for "ending Israeli occupation" with a conditional offer of returning to peace talks. At the same time, however, he will almost certainly attempt to avoid the tougher issues: Hamas rejection of peace and support for "armed resistance" against Israel; the dearth of Palestinian political incentives for major Israeli territorial concessions; and the security requirements of any realistic plan for sustainable, peaceful coexistence. So the best way to judge his performance is to see how much diplomatic room for maneuver he allows on all of the above issues. In this respect, what Abbas leaves out of his speech will be more important than what he puts in.

Specifically, for the speech to be judged as comparatively constructive, the following items should be conspicuous by their absence:

1. Any direct threat to sue Israel at the International Criminal Court or pursue other forms of "lawfare" against it,

especially before further diplomatic avenues are exhausted.

2. Any explicit support for delegitimizing, punishing, or isolating Israel.
3. Any immediate resort to the UN Security Council, where a resolution with a deadline would either force a U.S. veto or be considered legally binding. (Last Friday, at a press conference in Paris with Abbas, French president Francois Hollande hinted that a vaguer Security Council resolution might be in the offing.)
4. Any explicit endorsement of Hamas, a group that rejects even the principle of peace with Israel, remains on U.S. and EU terrorist lists, and provoked a war only a few short weeks ago. Tying himself so tightly to Hamas would be risky because it would jeopardize Western (and these days even Arab) aid to the PA.

Any one of the above items should be viewed as a significant diplomatic step backward.

On the positive side, to keep the door for peace open, Abbas should at minimum reiterate three key points he made briefly last September:

1. That the "quest to raise Palestine's status does not aim to delegitimize an existing state, Israel."
2. That a Palestinian state will "live in peace and security alongside the State of Israel."
3. That he is offering a path for negotiations rather than an ultimatum for Israeli territorial concessions.

To be sure, Abbas is poised to demand more advantageous terms of reference for any renewed peace talks, such as a clear-cut foundation on the 1967 frontiers. As he stated at Cooper Union in New York on Monday night, "We ask the international community to stop hiding behind the resumption of talks." Yet asking for talks on a better basis is vastly preferable to asking for a unilateral grant of territory and sovereignty, without any reference to or agreement with Israel.

In this connection, a more moderate Abbas position would enjoy support from an unexpected source: Palestinian public opinion. Polls conducted over the past several months show wide popular support, in the 80 percent range, for another UN initiative, but also considerable skepticism that it will produce any concrete benefits. Official PA media have been correspondingly reticent about the content or prospects of this year's effort, apparently to avoid raising unrealistic expectations. And in the most recent poll since the Gaza conflict, taken September 11-13, the Palestinian public appeared to revert from wartime radicalism to its traditionally positive stance on peace talks: according to the al-Najah University survey, a surprisingly robust majority of 58 percent favored resuming negotiations with Israel.

## WISH LIST ITEMS

**B**eyond these minimal desiderata, Abbas will have great scope for pleasant surprises. For example, he could condemn the kidnapping and murder of Israelis, as he commendably did at an Organization of Islamic Cooperation summit in Saudi Arabia this June. He could condemn rocket fire against Israel civilians. He could literally seize the day of his upcoming appearance -- which happens to coincide with the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year -- to convey holiday greetings to his Jewish listeners. He could say that he has ordered official PA television to stop broadcasting hate speech calling Jews "Nazis," "Satans," or "sons of pigs and monkeys," and that he has instructed his Fatah Party to stop boasting about terrorism on its official websites and social media. He could offer a more specific and compelling vision of peace, including the potential not merely for coexistence, but also for active cooperation. He could even accept Israel's offer to facilitate the development of Gaza's offshore gas reserves, so that the people of that territory can decrease their dependence on foreign aid and Israeli supplies of gas and electricity.

None of these possible surprises, almost by definition, is likely to feature in his speech, but any one of them would attract favorable international, American, and probably even Israeli notice. An easier (and therefore much more

likely) departure from his previous General Assembly addresses would be a clear initiative to take charge of Gaza's border crossings and reconstruction, with international inspections and assistance. This too would be a useful step forward if Abbas proves willing to say it.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

**B**eyond the immediate Palestinian perspective, Abbas will surely try to put his people's cause in the larger context of a global battle against Islamic extremism. As he declared in Paris last weekend, "Making peace will give added legitimacy to the fight against terrorism in the region." The reality, however, is that this tired trope of "linkage" has lost most of its credibility of late, particularly as ISIS has nothing to do with the Palestinian cause.

Indeed, Abbas's speech is unlikely to have much immediate effect on U.S. foreign policy, preoccupied as it is with more urgent regional crises. President Obama is scheduled to meet with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu a few days after the speech, on October 1, but their conversation will probably focus more on Syria, Iran, and perhaps Gaza reconstruction than on any near-term peace efforts. Nevertheless, if Abbas delivers a relatively conciliatory address at the UN on Friday, he may give President Obama grounds to urge Netanyahu to reciprocate in some fashion -- first with practical steps to ease tensions on the ground, and then with renewed efforts to revive the faltering long-term hopes for a peaceful, two-state solution.

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