

Why the UN Cannot Create Palestine

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Articles & Testimony

Israeli and Palestinian leaders should look to 1947 for a lesson on the importance of political pragmatism rather than focusing on an all-or-nothing approach.

The UN speeches of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are behind us. There are doubts that Abbas will even be able to secure the necessary nine of 15 votes in the UN Security Council to support a resolution on statehood, regardless of the expected U.S. veto.

But the resolution raises another question. If the United Nations created Israel in the past, why shouldn't it create the state of Palestine today?

This argument bears a certain allure, but does not apply in today's context. A dignified two-state solution for Palestinians and Israelis can only be reached by an agreement between the two sides to end their tragic conflict.

The United Nations created the state of Israel in 1947 because Britain sought an exit from the region. Its resources and energies depleted by World War II, London was no longer interested in shouldering its post-World War I responsibilities as the mandate power to administer the territory. Britain had committed itself in 1917 to a "national Jewish home" in what became known as the Balfour Declaration, which it then used its internationally backed mandate to effect. But Britain soon tired of being caught in the middle of conflicting Jewish and Arab nationalism.

In 1947, Britain sought the assistance of the newly founded United Nations to make its exit from this part of the Middle East. Today, however, Israelis and Palestinians cannot do the same. In a two-state solution, they will be living together in a very narrow swath of territory -- the two states will measure merely 50 miles wide from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River.

Yet, if there is an overriding lesson from the 1947 UN vote, it is that the perfect should not be the enemy of the good.

It was the pragmatism of the Jewish advocates -- known as Zionists -- that enabled their success. In 1947, the UN

called for a two-state solution that would divide the land between the Jews and the Arabs. Neither side would be fully satisfied by this arrangement, but it at least addressed some of their concerns.

Despite the resolution's call for internationalizing Jerusalem, mainstream Zionists accepted what became known as the Partition Plan. Although domestic critics attacked this camp, led by David Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann, for its moderation, members evinced considerable political courage and were not deterred. In contrast, the Arab camp viewed the Partition Plan as unjust in its call to share the territory, as they believed that the Zionists had no right to the land whatsoever.

The Zionists accepted half the loaf, and despite Arabs attacking it on the day of its birth, Israel flourished. Because the Arabs refused its half of the loaf, Palestine was never born.

The Palestinians missed a similar opportunity for statehood in 2000, when Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat rejected what became known as the Clinton Parameters, and again in 2008, when Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert offered President Abbas a deal that was even more generous. To this day, Abbas has never explained why he refused Olmert's offer, raising the question of whether the Palestinians will ever accept any deal.

It is for this reason that Israelis often quote their legendary statesman Abba Eban, declaring that "the Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity."

Today, it is the Netanyahu government that is being flogged with the Eban dictum, but the only Palestinian alternative to Abbas is the radical Hamas.

Netanyahu finds this choice unfair, because he believes he has consistently begged Abbas to return to negotiations, yet Abbas has only agreed to do so for two weeks in the past two and a half years. Netanyahu suspects a direct correlation between 1947, 2000, 2008, and today: that Palestinians are avoiding peace as a favorable track to statehood.

Meanwhile, given his suspicion of Netanyahu's intentions, Abbas fears that any resumption of negotiations would inevitably meander, damaging his popularity among the Palestinian people. This is one of the reasons why he is appealing to the United Nations.

One proposal to put talks back on track, under discussion behind the scenes, is that negotiations be guided by President Obama's key Middle East speeches in May, seeking to solve borders with land exchanges, as well as security arrangements and mutual recognition, which would lend structure and direction to the process. There are signs that Netanyahu and Abbas are seriously considering this option. Netanyahu hinted to it in Friday's speech, and this seems to be the direction of the long-awaited statement from the Quartet for Middle East Peace -- calling for intensified talks -- released on Friday afternoon.

The circumstances surrounding the Palestinian bid at the UN are very different from those surrounding the British appeal in 1947. Neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis are seeking to exit the region. The United Nations drama is misplaced: Peace needs to be made in the Middle East, not the Northeast. The suspicions and historical claims of both sides can only be resolved between them, as they will be the ones who must live with the results.

The leaders of both sides should look to 1947 for a lesson on the importance of political pragmatism, rather than an all-or-nothing approach. As President Obama said this week at the UN, there are no shortcuts to peace.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. Among his most recent publications is [Imagining the Border: Options for Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian Territorial Issue \(/templateC04.php?CID=301\)](/templateC04.php?CID=301), which includes an interactive map of potential borders. ❖

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