

How Not to Play Peacemaker: Ten Reasons Why Europe Should Reject the Palestinian Statehood Bid at the United Nations

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Articles & Testimony

Amos Yadlin and Robert Satloff counter the ten arguments posited in favor of Palestinian statehood by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Martti Ahtisaari and former EU foreign-policy chief Javier Solana in a recent *New York Times* op-ed.

This week, Palestinian leaders will attempt to bypass peace talks with Israel by appealing to the United Nations for recognition as a member state. European countries are reportedly divided on whether to support the Palestinians' effort or to side with U.S. President Barack Obama's administration, which opposes the idea as a threat to the concept of direct negotiations as the best way to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

To offer guidance to their fellow Europeans, like Moses descending from Mount Sinai, come a pair of the continent's leading lights -- Nobel Peace Prize laureate Martti Ahtisaari and former EU foreign-policy chief Javier Solana -- who penned a Sept. 16 *New York Times* op-ed offering 10 reasons why Europe should support the statehood bid. Amid the dozens of op-eds that have appeared on the issue, the Ahtisaari-Solana essay stands out as an exemplar of wise men both offering bad arguments and ignoring unpleasant realities.

Hamas, for example, makes no appearance in their essay, despite the fact that its influence hovers above Palestinian politics. The authors say they are eager to endorse the peacemaking and state-building efforts of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, but they skirt the fact that Abbas's strategy -- as he argued in his own May 17 *New York Times* op-ed -- is based on a commitment to "unity," code for reconciling his Fatah movement with the radical Islamist organization that controls a large slice of Palestinian territory and is opposed to Israel's very

existence.

Ahtisaari and Solana also seem oblivious to the fact that a U.N. statement recognizing Palestine within certain borders -- in this case, the lines that separated Israel and the Jordan-held West Bank prior to the 1967 war -- will make future progress toward a negotiated settlement with Israel virtually impossible. With U.N. approval of the shape of their state and, most likely, of "East Jerusalem" as its capital -- especially without conditioning these steps on the repatriation of Palestinian refugees to Palestine, not to Israel, and the need for a final "end of conflict/end of claims" agreement with Israel -- future Palestinian leaders will find it nearly impossible to compromise on these key issues, even if they want to do so.

Moreover, in a larger sense, Ahtisaari and Solana are also indifferent to how their advice invites Palestinians, and perhaps Israel's other Arab peace partners, to break their contractual commitments. Although both Israelis and Palestinians have acted in ways that fell short of their Oslo Accords promises in the past, there can be no dispute that the U.N. drive for statehood recognition violates the core Palestinian vow to resolve the conflict with Israel solely through bilateral negotiations. By supporting the U.N. route, Ahtisaari and Solana are effectively encouraging a culture of reneging on agreements -- an especially dangerous precedent at a time when powerful voices in Egypt and Jordan are calling for the suspension and even abrogation of their peace treaties with Israel.

The stakes in Turtle Bay this week, then, are high. In the spirit of the Ahtisaari-Solana essay, which offered 10 reasons why Europe should support the Palestinian statehood bid, here is a reading of their essay that adduces 10 reasons why Europe should oppose it.

1. **A yes vote does not protect the two-state solution.** Ahtisaari and Solana assert that the two-state solution is "under attack" by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Although Netanyahu may have made errors in his diplomacy, their account is an inversion of the facts of the past two-and-a-half years, during which Netanyahu has repeatedly endorsed the two-state solution and invited the Palestinians to join in negotiations -- from his Bar-Ilan speech in June 2009 to his speech before U.S. Congress this May.

The authors' accusation that Israel has undermined the potential for negotiations because of the "steady expansion of Israeli settlements" is also wrong. The Netanyahu government has not approved the construction of a single new West Bank settlement; moreover, according to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, the actual number of West Bank housing units approved under Netanyahu (2,830) is half the number approved under the previous government of Kadima Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (5,126).

2. **The statehood bid will not protect Europe's investment in a Palestinian state.** Yes, the Europeans have invested more than \$6.6 billion in the Palestinian Authority in the Oslo era. But a Palestinian "victory" at the United Nations would imperil, rather than validate, the European investment. If, as a result of the U.N. resolution, the Palestinian Authority chooses to go it alone, without economic and security cooperation with Israel, the chances it'll collapse are far more likely than the chances it'll survive, let alone thrive. Should that happen, Europe's considerable investment in Palestinian institutions will disappear.
3. **President Abbas's state-building achievements will not be helped by his U.N. bid.** As April's International Monetary Fund report on Palestinian state-building makes clear, not only was virtually every aspect of the impressive progress achieved by the Palestinian Authority made possible by Israel, but future progress will require even more Israeli cooperation. "To maintain the growth momentum, rebalance the composition of output, reduce regional disparities [i.e., Gaza compared with the West Bank], and accelerate the state-building process, it is essential for [Israel] to phase out all restrictions as soon as possible," the report noted. Prospects for

such cooperation are likely to vanish if the Palestinians opt instead to go it alone.

The Palestinians deserve support and encouragement for their efforts, but it is self-defeating to support a poison-pill plan for U.N. recognition that could destroy their practical partnership with Israel. The entire state-building enterprise may collapse with the hardening of positions -- and the potential violence -- the U.N. initiative will produce. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, who is chiefly responsible for the practical achievements of recent years, has restrained his enthusiasm for Abbas's U.N. effort. As Fayyad himself told an Israeli interviewer, "We want a state of Palestine, not a unilateral declaration of statehood."

4. **Voting yes at the U.N. won't protect European countries from charges of hypocrisy.** Ahtisaari and Solana say they are afraid that rejecting the Palestinian statehood bid "would expose Europeans to charges of double standards" from Arab governments keen to respond to public opinion in the frenzied, post-Tahrir Square political environment. But the notion that Europe should undermine chances for a negotiated solution in order to avoid accusations of double standards from Arab regimes that either have opposed peacemaking at every turn (Algeria, Iraq, Syria) or excel at making promises that they never deliver (Saudi Arabia) is a sad but revealing sign of the direction of European foreign policy.

In fact, endorsing the Palestinian U.N. resolution will only feed a virus in Arab politics that this year's revolutions sought to remedy -- the virus of distracting domestic populations from the real problems facing their countries by demagoguery over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Already, as the recent mob attack on the Israeli Embassy in Cairo attests, Egypt's would-be inheritors of the revolution -- Islamist, nationalist, and liberal alike -- have settled on crude anti-Zionism as an easy alternative to debating the deep and systemic problems that country faces. If this virus is allowed to survive, another casualty will be the brave but imperiled freedom fighters in Syria, who are increasingly calling for international intervention to protect them from Bashar al-Assad's crackdown. They must be beating their chests in frustration, wondering what they need to do to attract just a fraction of the international attention that the Palestinians have received.

5. **Supporting the Palestinian U.N. bid is not the price for maintaining close relations with Saudi Arabia.** Europe's foreign-policy luminaries suggest that supporting the Palestinians' statehood initiative will advance European interests, such as "preventing jihadist terrorism, containing Iran, security [of] energy supplies and retaining markets for our exports." In other words, Ahtisaari and Solana are fretting that Saudi Arabia will take its business elsewhere if Europe rebuffs the Palestinians.

This fear was stoked by another *New York Times* op-ed by former Saudi ambassador to Washington Prince Turki al-Faisal, who warned the United States of "profound negative consequences" should the Obama administration oppose the Palestinian statehood bid. But neither America nor Europe should fall for the Saudis' bluff. Riyadh's greatest fear is the Iranian nuclear bomb, against which transatlantic cooperation on sanctions is a vital tool. The idea that the House of Saud would respond to sensible European efforts to promote a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian peace by punishing Europe, and even risking global efforts to stop Iran's nuclear progress, runs against both history and logic. From oil policy to counterproliferation, Riyadh usually acts on a cold calculation of national interest, not emotion or pique, and a disputed U.N. vote on the Palestinians is unlikely to change that pattern of behavior.

6. **Voting for Palestinian statehood won't make it any easier for the Obama administration to deliver Israel.**

Ahtisaari and Solana contend that European backing for Palestinian statehood is a favor to Washington because it would strengthen the administration's ability to squeeze concessions from an increasingly isolated Israel. Thank you, but that's not what Washington actually asked of Europe. Over the summer, the White House tried to cobble together a diplomatic alternative to the statehood plan in the form of an international statement on terms of reference for new Israeli-Palestinian negotiations that would be based on Obama's statements this May on the Middle East peace process. That would include his formula of "1967 lines with swaps" as the basis for a final settlement, "Israel as a Jewish state/Palestine as a Palestinian state," and a strong focus on Israeli security -- but the Europeans demurred, not wanting to sign on to a statement that the Palestinians opposed. So, rather than help America the way America wants to be helped, Ahtisaari and Solana explained that Europe would help America by giving it a club to bludgeon Israel.

7. **The U.N. initiative will not reinforce Israel's legitimacy.** Ahtisaari and Solana go so far as to suggest that the Palestinian statehood bid "might even help Israel" and "reinforce the legitimacy of Israel's own existence." But if democratic Israel decides that this resolution is against its interests, it is a bit presumptuous for Europe to suggest that Israel doesn't know what it's doing.
8. **Voting in favor of the U.N. bid will not protect Israel from the International Criminal Court.** In a mind-twister, Ahtisaari and Solana claim that voting yes gives the Europeans a chance to limit the damage they have created by attempting to reach a quiet deal with the Palestinians on this arcane but important matter. Not only would such a hypothetical deal have no force of law or binding time limit, but the entire argument evinces a stunningly shallow understanding of the procedures governing the International Criminal Court, in which any party -- such as an aggrieved individual or a human rights watchdog group, for example -- can lodge a complaint once jurisdiction is clarified.

Even so, Abbas himself has been clear that the statehood bid is part of an attempt to seek redress in the courts for what he cannot get from Israel in negotiations. "Palestine's admission to the United Nations would ... pave the way for us to pursue claims against Israel at the United Nations, human rights treaty bodies and the International Court of Justice," he wrote in his recent op-ed.

9. **The U.N. bid does not make Palestinian violence less likely.** Ahtisaari and Solana argue that Palestinian leaders "need a sign of progress if they are to prevent frustrations turning to violence." The opposite is true. When Palestinians wake up the day after the resolution and see that nothing has changed except the nameplate on their seat at Turtle Bay, there is a real possibility they will rise up in protest against the Palestinian Authority as much as against Israel. The potential for violence, whether unintentional or provoked by radical groups like Hamas, is high. This will pose an unprecedented -- and manifestly preventable -- test to the quiet cooperation between the Israeli and Palestinian security forces that has made possible the progress in state-building during the last two years.
10. **A yes vote will naturally lead European countries to recognize Palestine on a bilateral basis.** Ahtisaari and Solana assure us that the U.N. statehood route has little real-world meaning because "only individual states can bestow recognition on Palestine." But this is far from reassuring. The two authors should be thanked for foreshadowing the logical next phase in the Palestinian strategy. If European countries vote for the Palestinian request for membership in the United Nations, they will surely be less able to say no the next time Palestinians do request state-to-state recognition. For more, see No. 4.

Read properly, Ahtisaari and Solana provide 10 convincing reasons why Europe should not vote for U.N. recognition of Palestine. To be sure, voting for Palestine is not as dangerous as failing to stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. But for anyone interested in Israeli-Palestinian peace, it is a foolish step in the wrong direction.

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