

The Palestinian Bid for UN Membership: Rationale, Response, Repercussions

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Brief Analysis

On September 12, 2011, Ghaith al-Omari, Amos Yadlin, and David Makovsky addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. al-Omari, executive director of the American Task Force on Palestine, previously served as director of international relations in the Office of the Palestinian President and as advisor to then prime minister Mahmoud Abbas. General Yadlin, the Institute's Kay fellow on Israeli national security, served for more than forty years in the Israel Defense Forces, including the last five as head of defense intelligence. Mr. Makovsky, the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at the Institute, is author of the new study [The Palestinian Bid for UN Membership: Rationale, Response, Repercussions \(/templateC04.php?CID=353\)](/templateC04.php?CID=353). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

GHAITH AL-OMARI

The Palestinian decision to appeal to the UN is rooted in frustration with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu's government and the conviction that negotiations are futile at the moment. Furthermore, they believe that President Obama's efforts, while admirable, will not produce results. These beliefs -- combined with the sense of urgency imparted by the Arab Spring and the growing perception that the Palestinian leadership can no longer back down from the initiative -- makes it likely that they will head to the UN this month as planned.

Although the nature and eventual outcome of the UN bid is unclear, a two-state solution will remain in the interests

of all parties regardless of the result. Therefore, the key question is not what happens at the UN, but what happens afterward.

Ongoing security coordination between Palestinian and Israeli forces has led to unprecedented stability in the West Bank. Yet, with emotions running high in the aftermath of a UN resolution, the dynamics on the ground could spin violently out of control. Preserving this security coordination is therefore vital, as officials on both sides acknowledge. The United States would be wise to send a strong message to that effect as well.

Even if security coordination endures, the peace process is unlikely to move forward in the near future. Accordingly, the United States must focus on areas in which it can facilitate progress, such as ongoing Palestinian institution building. This requires not only continued financial investment in the process but also translations of these efforts into successful political institutions. Cutting off American aid would only damage the process, send the wrong signals to the Palestinian public, and possibly lead to the collapse of the Palestinian Authority. In light of these conditions, Washington will need to focus less on the legalities of the peace process and more on whether U.S. actions ultimately lead away from peace and into dangerously uncharted territory.

A U.S. veto at the UN Security Council would be problematic as well. Specifically, it could spur demonstrations against the United States and generate a new regional political landscape that is more difficult for Washington to navigate. Most Palestinians are not familiar with the nuances of American politics and therefore do not understand two key factors: first, that a less "Palestinian friendly" administration could be elected next year, and second, that if Obama is reelected, Palestinian intractability now will only make him more reticent toward their demands later.

AMOS YADLIN

There are three rules that all policymakers should adhere to: never panic, avoid euphoria, and be slightly paranoid. Applying these rules to the UN situation is illuminating.

First, it should be acknowledged that most of the problems in the Middle East do not center on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as both the Egyptian uprising and the recent deterioration of Israeli-Turkish relations show. Egypt's revolution was a rebellion of liberal youths against an oppressive leader, while the most recent Turkish-Israeli quarrel is merely another step in Erdogan's policy shift away from the West and back toward the Ottoman system.

Nevertheless, even though the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not the crux of Middle Eastern instability, the Palestinian bid for statehood warrants serious consideration. However unlikely some of its suggested consequences may be, the aftermath could prove dangerous without proper government planning. If all sides behave responsibly, we can weather the outcome of the UN vote. If not, several potential nightmare scenarios could unfold.

Israelis fear that a UN resolution could:

- grant the Palestinians 1967 borders and other demands, leaving Israel without any cards to play in future negotiations;
- encourage Palestinians to wage a diplomatic war of attrition against Israel in the International Criminal Court (ICC) and International Court of Justice;
- encourage Palestinian demonstrations that spin out of control; or
- spread unrest from the Palestinian territories to the Israeli Arab population.

Palestinians fear that a resolution could:

- dramatically harm their relations with the friendliest U.S. administration to date;

- be viewed as a breach of their Oslo commitments, leading to retaliatory Israeli actions such as the withholding of tax transfers to the PA, increased construction or even annexation of some settlements, or violations of Israel's own Oslo commitments;
- produce a West Bank state that ostracizes diaspora Palestinians because it includes no provisions regarding right of return for refugees;
- lead to the PA's collapse due to lack of funds and demonstrations that spin out of control, possibly empowering Hamas.

And all sides fear a loss of faith in negotiations, a return to the violence and chaos of September 2000, and potential escalation into regional war.

Washington is also concerned that the Arab world will respond angrily to a U.S. veto at the Security Council. Yet similar fears proved unfounded last February, when the U.S. veto of a contentious resolution on Israeli settlement construction drew little reaction from Arab publics. Furthermore, almost half of all Arab nations -- and even half of the Palestinian populace -- remain opposed to a two-state solution based on 1967 borders, so an American veto of a resolution that echoes those terms would probably not generate the expected havoc in the Arab world.

Finally, the United States has made a commendable effort to avoid confrontation at the UN, but it cannot invest more in the peace process than the two sides themselves are willing to put forward. At the end of the day, both parties will have to make difficult concessions for peace. In the interim, Palestinian leaders are pursuing a fourfold strategy: avoid negotiations with Israel, build a state from the bottom up, involve the international community, and delegitimize Israel. As long as they believe that time is on their side, they will never reach a peace agreement with Israel.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

The Palestinian UN bid could have broader ramifications than intended. At the international level, there are currently around eighty separatist movements throughout the world, and a successful Palestinian resolution would create a precedent for other such movements to haul their adversaries to the UN. In more local terms, Israel fears three possible consequences: UN demarcation of a Palestinian state's future borders; a Palestinian campaign to prosecute Israeli officials at the ICC; and Palestinian efforts to assert sovereignty and challenge on-the-ground realities. The materialization of any of these scenarios would greatly endanger future peacemaking efforts.

To avoid a confrontation at the UN, the Obama administration has concentrated on securing a new Middle East Quartet statement calling for a return to negotiations based on the president's May 19 and May 22 speeches. Yet the European members of the Quartet (which also includes Russia, the United States, and the UN) are hesitant to release such a statement. Specifically, recent statements by EU foreign policy coordinator Lady Catherine Ashton indicate that she is uncomfortable with the prospect of creating EU disunity over the Palestinian bid.

Because the possibility of the Quartet issuing an effective statement diminishes daily, the EU is now making an eleventh-hour effort of its own to field an alternative resolution that would preserve a semblance of European unity, prevent a confrontation with Washington, and serve as "quasi terms of reference" for the resumption of negotiations. Israel has made clear that it would not oppose such a resolution. And the Palestinians may be amenable to it as well if it garners support from the entire EU; they recognize that backing from the twenty-seven EU states is crucial to demonstrating the momentum of their national aspirations.

Despite all the brouhaha surrounding this month's UN bid, the United States must also take a wider view of the situation and keep sight of its long-term objectives. First, to improve the chances of success for future negotiations,

backchannel lines of communications should be established between Israelis and Palestinians as soon as possible. Second, to avoid violence on the ground after the UN vote, Israel and the PA should train their security forces in crowd control, work toward a common understanding of what would be acceptable during post-vote protests, and restrict any such demonstrations to "Area A" of the West Bank, away from Israeli checkpoints and settlements.

As for the prospect of cutting off congressional aid to the PA, Washington should avoid such a move in favor of other punitive measures such as suspending high-level meetings between Palestinian and Israeli officials, since eliminating aid could cause the PA's collapse and benefit Hamas. The U.S. security coordinator should also be deployed as a line of communication between Israeli and Palestinian security forces.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Olivia Holt-Ivry. ❖

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