

Recent Official U.S. Statements on Palestinian Statehood, the Implications of 'May 4, 1999,' and the Prospect of a Unilateral Declaration of Independence:

On the Record

Oct 8, 1998



Brief Analysis

In the Oslo Accords, that question [of statehood] was left for the final status negotiations. Because of the heavy involvement of the United States in the peace process, I believe it would be an error for me to comment on that. I think the important thing is that has to be resolved in the final status negotiations as provided for in the Oslo Accords. As long as the peace process is going forward, whatever the United States says on that will be unhelpful to the ultimate outcome. [A reporter asked about Hillary Rodham Clinton's comment on the benefits of Palestinian statehood.] She's not the president and she's not trying to manage this peace process. That's a different thing. But I'm telling you -- we gave our word when we agreed to try to be an honest broker to respect the Oslo process. . . I have to tell you, when I'm in Israel or when I'm with American Jewish groups, they also try to get me to say things that I said before I was the President and the broker of the process that I can no longer say. . . I gave my word that I would be faithful to the process that these two parties set out for the resolution of their agreement, and I have to try to do that." --- President Bill Clinton in photo opportunity with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Chairman Yasir Arafat at the Oval Office, Washington, DC, September 28, 1998.

"Our position is well known, it's a final status issue and it's up to them to decide. There have been a number of statements made, and I think everybody -- both of the leaders know the difficulty of making statements, unilateral statements of any kind, which I think create difficulties for the environment." --- Secretary of State Madeleine Albright at press briefing, Washington, DC, September 28, 1998

"We do not agree with unilateral acts as far as issues that are final, permanent status issues." --- Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, September 24, 1998.

"We oppose a unilateral statement of that kind [i.e., Palestinian independence] just like we have opposed many unilateral actions that both sides have taken in recent months." --- State Department Spokesman James Rubin, September 24, 1998.

"I remain steadfastly committed to achieving a lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East. On the question of a Palestinian state, my position has not changed. This issue, like the other issues reserved for permanent status talks, can only be settled through negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. I have repeatedly and publicly said that unilateral actions and statements by either party concerning these issues are not helpful to the peace process." --- President Bill Clinton in letter to Representative James Saxton, August 6, 1998.

"The clock is ticking down to May 4th of 1999, and if we do not succeed in getting to a permanent status deal by then, or at least having the permanent status negotiations on track in a way that both sides have an interest in staying in the negotiations until they produce an agreement, if we can't achieve either of those things, then we will face a potentially very explosive situation. . . Our position is clear: Neither party should take unilateral steps that would be

perceived as preempting the outcome of the permanent status negotiations." --- Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk, July 17, 1998.

"We would see [UDI] as an unfortunate development because that would be a unilateral decision by one of the parties preempting the work that the parties need to do to resolve what are clearly final status issues. That would be contrary to the agreements that the Palestinian Authority and the Israelis have reached on how they're going to deal with these matters. So we would not only most likely not join it, we would consider it a setback in the effort to achieve comprehensive, just, and lasting peace in the region. . . Our view very clearly is that that is a step that runs contrary to the process that the two parties have divined for themselves as a way of resolving what are very difficult issues to begin with. And that would be a step that would move in the wrong direction as it pertains to trying to reach agreements that will deepen the peace between the two parties." --- White House Press Secretary Mike McCurry, May 28, 1998.

"The interim period under Oslo concludes on May 4, 1999 -- less than a year from now. Those who believe that drifting is acceptable, or who believe they can declare unilateral positions or take unilateral acts when the interim period end, are courting disaster. Both sides must understand that the issues reserved for permanent status discussions -- including the status of the West Bank and Gaza and of settlements--can only be settled by negotiation. That was the spirit and logic of Oslo." --- Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, May 12, 1998.

The following relevant exchange occurred during Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk's testimony to the House International Relations Committee, July 29, 1998.

REP. BRAD SHERMAN (D-CA): In February of '94, then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher told a committee of this House: "Certainly, the United States does not support a Palestinian state. Certainly, I think responsible officials of Israel are the best judge as to whether and whether or not the steps they have taken are the right ones for Israel. We are helping the Israeli leaders try to achieve the results that they want to achieve. I think that is the proper role for the United States in this situation." And he ended by saying, "We do not certainly support a Palestinian state, as we never have." Do these words still reflect American foreign policy vis-a-vis a Palestinian state?

MR. INDYK: Congressman Sherman, the issue of Palestinian statehood is an issue which needs to be dealt with in the context of the final status negotiations, which will deal with other issues as agreed on between the parties: Jerusalem, refugees, borders, and the issue of what form the entity will take and what powers it will have--the Palestinian entity, that is. And we are strongly opposed to unilateral actions, as I mentioned in the previous answer, that would seek to preempt the outcome of those negotiations. And unilateral actions involving a unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state are included in that concern that we have that neither side take steps that would preempt the outcome of those negotiations.

REP. SHERMAN: So if there was a unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state, how would the United States respond?

MR. INDYK: Well, I think, as I explained, that is an issue which should be dealt with in the final status negotiations, and that is the position that we would take.

REP. SHERMAN: But if there was such a declaration, how would we respond, assuming the declaration was unilateral and not part of a final status agreement?

MR. INDYK: We would oppose a unilateral declaration and make clear that this is an issue for final status negotiations.

Compiled by Ben Orbach

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