



AN ISRAELI VIEW

More diplomatic theater?

Gerald M. Steinberg

Will the Palestine Liberation Organization's decision to seek unilateral recognition of Palestinian statehood through a United Nations vote in September be a game-changer or another quickly forgotten piece of political theater? Will this move, led by Fateh leader and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, provide the foundation for the long-awaited two-state peace framework? Or will it trigger a political "tsunami", in the words of Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, accompanied by mass Palestinian confrontations with Israeli security forces, further political isolation of Israel, and perhaps a wider regional conflict?

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Given our long and bitter shared history, a positive outcome

based on a UN General Assembly vote for Palestinian statehood seems unlikely, to understate the case. The two entirely opposing versions of history and historical justice--the core obstacles to peace--as well as differences over territory and security remain unbridgeable. But at the same time, the disaster scenario is also unlikely. Without the endorsement of the UN Security Council, where US President Barack Obama has pledged a veto, there is little legal or substantive significance to these events.

However, given Israel's already weakened international position, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Israel Foreign Ministry officials have expended considerable effort to persuade Europe and Latin America that the Palestinian campaign in the UN is counterproductive and destabilizing. Within the Israeli political framework, there are calls for annexing territory if a UN resolution seeks to impose a pre-1967 map based on 1949 ceasefire lines that do not constitute an international border and that Israelis see as not defensible.

Netanyahu can also point to a May 16 op-ed article in the New York Times in which Abbas highlighted Palestinian victimhood and emphasized confrontation. According to Abbas, "Palestine's admission to the United Nations would pave the way for the internationalization of the conflict as a legal matter, not only a political one. It would also pave the way for us to pursue claims against Israel at the United Nations, human rights treaty bodies and the International Court of Justice." Clearly, the expansion of Palestinian "lawfare" against Israel would not further peace and compromise.

As a result of these and other factors, there are indications that, in addition to the United States, some key European countries are concerned about this gambit. Some officials realize that the UN effort is yet another means for Abbas and the PLO to avoid direct negotiations with Israel along with the necessary compromises on refugee claims, Jerusalem and recognizing the Jewish right to national sovereignty.

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There are also signs that some parts of Palestinian society-- particularly on the West Bank--are less than enthusiastic about this scenario of symbolic independence and possible confrontation. In recent years, under the pragmatic leadership of PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, their economic situation has improved dramatically, while an improved security framework has increased freedom of movement. Another period of instability, terrorism and the necessary Israeli responses to protect Israeli civilians would quickly destroy all of these gains.

One of the biggest obstacles to the declaration of Palestinian statehood, based on a UN General Assembly vote, is the problem of Gaza, which remains under the firm control of Hamas following the violent coup and expulsion of Fateh in 2007. In May, with the prodding of the post-Mubarak Egyptian leadership, the leaders of Fateh and Hamas announced a national-unity agreement, creating at least the facade of Palestinian Authority control over Gaza. Skeptics, including Palestinians, noted that, given weak Fateh leadership and the ruthless methods employed by Hamas, the latter could use the unity framework to restore its position and extend its rule from Gaza to the West Bank. But in the two months following the announcement, the unity agreement has not led to any substantive change or to agreement on policies or leadership. As a result, a General Assembly discussion on Palestinian independence would face the unresolved problem of Gaza.

At the regional level, the ongoing confrontations taking place under the banner of the "Arab spring" will also have important impacts on Palestinian strategy. The leaders of Egypt and Syria are busy trying to ensure their own survival. At the same time, another round of Israeli-Palestinian clashes could lead to pressures for intervention, adding another dimension to an already unstable framework. The Jordanian leadership has never been enthusiastic about a Palestinian state on its borders, with its potential spillover into Jordan's own Palestinian population.

Given all of these factors, the two months until September provide plenty of time for multiple changes and extensive political maneuvering. Despite the perception that under Obama the US is too weak and confused to lead, it is possible that sustained pressure from the White House combined with a congressional threat to end aid will convince Abbas to freeze the campaign for a United Nations vote. If this occurs, the focus will then shift to formulating the diplomatic move that will inevitably follow, and a new process will begin. -Published 4/7/2011 © bitterlemons.org

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