

COMMENTARY

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The Palestinian Authority: Strategic Moves on the International Front

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The stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations and the lack of prospects for their resumption anytime soon has persuaded the Palestinian Authority (PA) to chart its own course by applying to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) as a non-voting member state. However uncertain the prospect of such a move may be from the PA's perspective, there is very little to lose at this juncture and perhaps much to gain in taking such a unilateral step.

The Palestinians are counting on Israel's increasing isolation in the international community and the overwhelming political support for their cause, which is also the official policy of the US. The forthcoming elections in the US as well as in Israel, regardless of their outcome, will provide the Palestinians with an opportune time to thrust the nearly forgotten Palestinian problem into the Israeli and American political agendas while ensuring that the conflict returns to the forefront of the international community's attention.

From the Palestinian standpoint, the Netanyahu government does not want to negotiate in earnest and does not believe in seeking a resolution to the conflict based on a two-state solution. They point to the continuing expansion of existing settlements and the building of new ones as evidence of this. Moreover, the fact that Israel refuses to accept, after four years of calm, a renewed freeze on settlements, a release of additional prisoners, broader freedoms of movement and its acquiescence to the settlers' harassment of Palestinians, all suggests that the Israeli government only talks about a two-state solution but has no intention of preparing the groundwork to achieve such an outcome. The recent union of Netanyahu's Likud Party with Yisrael Beytenu, led by Foreign Minister Lieberman, seriously suggests that the new Israeli coalition government should be led by Netanyahu, and will hold onto even more extremist views than the current one, which will further diminish any hope for achieving a peaceful solution if the political dynamics are frozen in place.

In addition, a growing majority of Palestinians believe that many Israelis have given up on the prospect of a two-state solution, as they have taken several one-sided actions in the past, including the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and the expropriation of Palestinian land. Even now, Israel is considering further unilateral actions, as was recently suggested by Defence Minister Ehud Barak who proposed withdrawing from 60 percent of the West Bank. From the Palestinian standpoint, Israel's contemplation of taking these steps further justifies a unilateral action on their part while being assured that their quest to become a non-voting member in the UNGA is guaranteed to pass by an overwhelming majority of the international community.

From the Israeli perspective, the regional turmoil in the wake of the Arab Spring, the Iranian threat, the PA's refusal to negotiate unconditionally and the notion that the Palestinians do not really seek peace has made it impossible to restart negotiations as the outcome may prove to be as futile as previous peace talks. Moreover, Israel does not trust the Palestinians to negotiate in good faith and certainly does not believe they will adhere to any agreement that may be reached. The Netanyahu government further insists that as long as Palestinian extremists (i.e. Hamas, Islamic Jihad and others) continue to advocate the ultimate destruction of Israel, there is hardly any point in discussing peace negotiations, particularly when the Palestinian public is continuously being fed this narrative. In addition, Israel maintains that as long as the Palestinians remain politically divided between Hamas and Fatah, any agreement that may be reached will be torpedoed by extremist Palestinian factions with the support of outside players such as Iran.

The passage of the Palestinian application to the UNGA will undoubtedly carry a big price tag. It could, for instance, instigate Israel to impose greater restrictions of movement in the West Bank, withhold collected taxes from the PA, restrict trade between Israel and the West Bank, accelerate the expansion of settlements and even annex additional Palestinian territory and institute harsher policies in order to put greater pressure on the Palestinians. In addition, since the US does not support unilateralism from either the Israelis or the Palestinians, it may take punitive action against the Palestinians including the cutting, at least temporarily, of financial aid and political support by other countries that the US can exert influence on.

The advantages, however, outweigh the disadvantages. The Palestinians' unilateral action is consistent with the upheaval sweeping the Middle East. The message of the Arab Spring has not been lost on the Palestinians. If Arab youth are dying by the tens of thousands in Syria and elsewhere to gain freedom, why should they continue to live under occupation? The pressure of the Palestinian restive youth on the PA to act is mounting, leaving President Abbas little choice but to act before he loses what is left of his legitimacy. Thus, UNGA membership will internationalize the Palestinian cause and provide transparent support by the international community that will have a propelling political effect. Moreover, regardless of who wins in the US and Israeli elections, the victors will have to confront this new reality and can no longer ignore it without repercussions. Finally, the main advantage is that it thrusts the Israeli-Palestinian conflict back into the spotlight, forcing the international community, especially the U.S., to take a new look and push to restart the negotiations with an end game clearly in sight.

For Israel, the Palestinian move will force Israel to face a new reality, which will inherently engender overwhelming pressure from the international community to support and act on a two-state solution. Even if the US objects to the proposed Palestinian UNGA membership quest (which is all but assured), the prospective support of the majority of the European Community in particular will lend the Palestinians a major moral and practical victory that no Israeli government can afford to dismiss. No matter what measures Israel takes to retaliate against the move, it will not provide Israel with any meaningful advantage, as the entire peace process will assume a new momentum and Israel's international isolation will be exacerbated. Regardless of the political makeup set to emerge following the US and the Israeli elections, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will become front and centre for both countries, forcing them to deal with this new reality which Israel is assiduously trying to prevent.

How Israel and the US handle the aftermath of the Palestinians' UN membership, however, could dramatically advance the peace process, provided that the new US administration commits to becoming directly involved in mediation and remain persistent and consistent. If the Israelis simply retaliate against the Palestinians and the US acquiesces, the situation will become extremely more volatile and dangerous. The US needs to reign in both sides in order to stop the potential deterioration and come up with a practical framework, using the Palestinians' new standing as an opportunity to constructively push the process forward. To that end, the US should advance its own framework for peace based on prior negotiated agreements reached between Israel and the Palestinians in previous negotiations in 2000 and 2007/08. The US must employ both coercive and interest-based strategies to pressure both the Israelis and the Palestinians to make the necessary concessions to reach an agreement.

Notwithstanding Israeli and US objections to the Palestinians' move, it may well unfreeze the peace process or at a minimum demonstrate whether the Israeli and Palestinian claims to seeking a viable two-state solution are mere political posturing or based on an honest desire to end the conflict. Indeed, the changing political dynamics resulting from the Palestinian bid can be turned into an advantage for Israel as well. It will keep the two-state solution alive, which ultimately is in Israel's best interest, provided that vision and realism prevail and the new emerging opportunity is not squandered.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/the-palestinian-authority-strategic-moves-on-the-international-front/>

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