

COMMENTARY

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Abbas' Dismal Failure at the United Nations

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As someone who has consistently advocated a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians based on a two-state solution, I was appalled to hear the speech delivered by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas at the United Nations General Assembly. Instead of using the occasion to provide constructive proposals and use reconciliatory language to advance the cause of peace, he engaged in acrimonious and discordant statements against Israel that did nothing but further embitter and alienate the Israeli public, whose support he needs the most to realize Palestinian aspirations.

I wonder if Abbas has any clue how his irresponsible public utterances reinforce the negative perceptions between the Israelis and Palestinians and perpetuate the endemic hostility which has and remains the core evil that has thwarted all peace efforts in the past.

He gave a campaign-style speech, appealing to his own public in an effort to salvage his sagging popularity, while being completely oblivious to the fact that he was addressing the international community to further cement its support of the Palestinian cause.

To be sure, as the late Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban once said, "The Arabs [Palestinians] never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity." Abbas' performance was a classic case of a missed opportunity.

His failure to strike a balance between his justifiable resistance to the occupation and the need to rally the support of the Israeli public was a major blunder, deeply injurious to the Palestinian cause.

For someone who seems genuine in seeking peace, he shattered the trust of many Israelis, who view him as a reliable partner that deserves their support.

In his polarizing speech, Abbas spared no deprecating characterization of Israel, the very country with which he must negotiate to end the occupation and establish a Palestinian state—a dim prospect made dimmer by his desperate need to maintain his position.

He accused Israel of committing genocide three times, a horrifying term that enraged every Israeli. They know the real meaning of genocide, when the Jews were led like sheep to the slaughter. They also know that their army took every precaution to protect the lives of innocent Palestinian civilians during the Israel-Hamas war.

Abbas invoked the word Nakba (the “catastrophe” of 1948) five times, which does nothing but enflame emotional outbursts anew, making it ever more difficult for him to make and for the Palestinians to accept any concessions to facilitate a peace agreement with Israel.

In his wisdom, he referred to Israel as a racist state seven times without thinking that such maligning attribution only undermines the negotiating process and intensifies the distrust, which will make the conflict ever more intractable.

He recklessly used the word fascist twice, but however cruel the Israeli occupation may be, ascribing such a revolting word reminds the Israelis of their own victimhood, which hardens rather than lessens their antagonism and enmity toward the Palestinians.

As if the above charges are insufficient to paint the “true face” of Israel, Abbas throws in, for good measure, another vile characterization of Israel as an apartheid state twice and as a terrorist state, well, only once.

President Abbas strongly denounced Israel’s massive air attacks against Gaza, but did not even allude to the nearly 4,000 rockets fired indiscriminately by Hamas at Israel’s urban centres including Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Abbas rightfully condemned the abduction of a young Palestinian boy, Mohammed Abu Khdeir, who was gruesomely burned alive, but conveniently forgot the kidnapping and summary execution of three Israeli teenagers by Hamas’ operatives—Naftali Fraenkel, Gilad Shaer and Eyal Yifran—which precipitated the latest Israel-Hamas war.

I am not a great fan of Prime Minister Netanyahu and have for years been critical of his policy toward the Palestinians. However, in his speech at the UNGA, he rose above the fray and conveyed a message that resonated even among the Arab states’ representatives as he likened Hamas to ISIS.

Netanyahu emphasized the danger of militant Islamists to the Arab states and skilfully pointed out that Shiite Iran is a threat not only to Israel but also to the Sunni Arab states. He drew a glaring common cause to which every Arab state could subscribe.

Instead of engaging in a tit-for-tat with Abbas, Netanyahu did not even once criticize the Palestinian Authority, but rather singled out Hamas who instigated the last war that led to the death of nearly 2,100 Palestinians and massive destruction throughout Gaza.

Netanyahu clung to the larger regional picture and made a strong case that the regional challenges can be met when Israel and the Arab states are at peace, which will facilitate and usher in peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

As I read and re-read Abbas' speech, I wondered who the advisors are that recommended he go on a tirade against Israel in front of the international community instead of putting forth constructive and credible plans that would advance the Palestinian quest for a state of their own.

Demanding an end to the occupation within an unspecified period is not a plan; to threaten to turn to the International Criminal Court is not a plan; to join Hamas without insisting that it renounce violence is not a plan.

Instead, he should have started by seeking the support of the international community to resettle the Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and Gaza, instead of continuously using them as political pawns for seven decades.

For Abbas to fall into the trap that Hamas carefully dug for him suggests only one thing: squeezed between Israel and Hamas, Abbas lost his bearings. He knows only too well that Hamas seeks his political demise and instead of calling a spade a spade, he succumbed to the bitter reality of Palestinian factionalism and Hamas' whims.

The Palestinians have no leaders with vision and courage, leaders who can change the political discourse and abandon the old narrative of hatred and animosity toward Israel and the empty slogans that have long since lost any meaning and only poison another generation of Palestinians.

That said, Abbas can still play an important role in the upcoming indirect Israeli-Hamas negotiations in Cairo. He may now have one more chance to assert his leadership. He can do so by insisting that the Palestinian Authority take real charge over the security in Gaza, which in any case both Egypt and Israel insist upon.

He must also make it abundantly clear to Hamas that the PA will not come to its aid under the false pretences of a unity government unless Hamas cease and desist from provoking Israel and gradually demilitarize Gaza; otherwise, no power can force Israel to lift the blockade.

The Arab states and especially Egypt, who quietly hailed Israel's inflicting such a punishing blow on Hamas, are as eager as Israel to emasculate Hamas.

Unfortunately, there is only a small chance that the negotiations in Egypt could lead to such an outcome. But then, this is the only outcome that can save Abbas politically and spare the Palestinians in Gaza from another disastrous confrontation with Israel.

This may well be his last opportunity—one he cannot afford to miss.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. **Web Link:** <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/abbas-dismal-failure-united-nations/>

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