



PERSPECTIVES

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After September Comes October

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The decision to cut off negotiations with Israel and go to the UN in September to bid for state recognition is not going to bring the Palestinians closer to the establishment of a state. The UN is a morally bankrupt institution, totally ineffective in curing the dysfunctional Palestinian national movement. Israel, however, is united and strong enough to meet the challenge of Palestinian unilateralism.

Earlier this year, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas made the decision to cut off the Palestinian Authority's (PA) negotiations with Israel and go to the UN in September to bid for state recognition. There, a US veto at the UN Security Council is expected, while at the UN General Assembly (GA), a large majority of its members are likely to endorse a motion recognizing a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. While such a resolution is not binding according to international law, its prospects have elicited negative reactions from Israel, the US and parts of the international community who deplore the Palestinian unilateral approach and fear the consequences of UN approval. Israel's defense minister, Ehud Barak, has even warned of an impending "diplomatic tsunami."

These fears are greatly exaggerated. First, the UN lacks legitimacy as it is a morally bankrupt institution that gives an equal voice to the worst aggressors and human rights offenders on the globe. It is unclear how a resolution by such a powerless institution could possibly make a dent in a century-old ethnic conflict in the Holy Land. What can the UN actually do to implement the GA recommendations? The outcome will certainly be negative, reinforcing Palestinian intransigence.

Unfortunately, GA resolutions cannot fix the Palestinian national movement, which is hopelessly fractured and dysfunctional. The UN cannot turn the Palestinian factions into one political entity. Can the UN bring Gaza and the West Bank together to present reasonable interlocutors for Israeli negotiators? Can the UN mellow the Hamas lust to kill Jews and to eradicate Israel? Can it cure the Palestinians of the *shaheed* death culture?

Is the UN in a position to infuse pragmatism into Palestinian political culture? The Palestinians still insist on the invented “right of return” for Palestinian refugees, which most of the world sees as an unrealistic demand and a huge obstacle to peace. The Palestinians are trying to rewrite history by denying Jewish history in Jerusalem. They are still not ready to concede that they lost the struggle over Jerusalem, a united capital city, which the Jews will adamantly defend. Israel is unquestionably stronger and time is on its side. Nevertheless, the Palestinians remain “bad losers,” not willing to make a pragmatic deal in order to achieve statehood.

The UN cannot deliver a state. It can neither change the facts on the ground, nor Palestinian behavior. The Palestinians had two historic opportunities to build a state, in 1948 and again in 1993, but both opportunities were squandered by failed leadership. Recently, we have observed somewhat more successful efforts at state building by PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. While he is arguably the best thing that has happened to the Palestinians in their short history, his popularity among his people is quite low, indicating the dysfunctional character of Palestinian politics. The images of a blooming Ramallah, the fruits of Fayyad's efforts, are misleading.

Can the PA survive without begging for international support every few months? Can it survive cutting down its bloated and corrupt bureaucracy as a prerequisite for building a healthy economy? The much lauded US-trained Palestinian troops have yet to meet the real test in the main mission of state building – monopoly over use of force. The current abundance of illegal weapons poses an extraordinary domestic security challenge for a nascent state. Can these troops be trusted to fight a serious challenge from Hamas, or will we see them collapse just as an earlier version of US-trained troops did in Gaza?

Actually, regular Israeli military incursions against Hamas infrastructure in the West Bank keep the PA safe. Moreover, access to Israel's labor market, money transfers, and many other services are critical to the PA's daily operations. Would statehood bring the same benefits?

The PA leadership realizes that their options vis-à-vis Israel are limited and that another terrorist campaign would turn out to be extremely destructive to the Palestinians. The power differential between a democratic, prosperous and militarily strong Israel and the

corrupt, autocratic and fragmented Palestinians is only growing. Israel managed to "win" the first two Intifadas and can do so again. Now it is preparing for the Palestinians' non-violent attempt to challenge the Israeli military, which may affect Israel's image abroad and at home.

Actually, the Palestinian UN bid is an opportunity for Israeli unilateral measures such as annexation of the settlement blocs and the Jordan rift area – necessary for establishing a defensible border along the Jordan River. Furthermore, Israel can implement economic sanctions to exact a cost for the violation of the Oslo agreements, which left the decision on the nature of the Palestinian entity for final status talks.

The main challenge to Israel, however, is not on the diplomatic front where it is doing better than its critics think. The Arab world is in the throes of a socio-political crisis hardly able to do anything but pay lip-service in support of a Palestinian state. Israel's diplomats managed to prevent an international flotilla from breaking the Gaza naval siege. Israel was also successful in procuring international understanding for its demand to be recognized by the Palestinians as a Jewish state. Furthermore, Washington is solidly behind Jerusalem on most issues, and the strategic relationship is hardly affected by differences on peace negotiations.

What is at stake, however, is Israel's social cohesion. A united Israel behind a government perceived as doing enough for securing peace will be able to sustain protracted conflict. Netanyahu's stable government meets these requirements. So far, a huge number of Israelis strongly believe that the Palestinians are not ready to make the necessary concessions for peace. A UN resolution is unlikely to change public opinion in Israel, which regards the UN as incompetent and hostile. Finally, the upheaval in the Arab world reiterates a great need for caution and for insistence on defensible borders.

Unless there emerges a more pragmatic Palestinian leadership, the conflict will continue to simmer. In all probability, September 2011 will be followed by October and many other months without a Palestinian state in the offing.

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