

# Perspectives

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## Mutually Assured Self-Destructive Policies

by Dr. Alon Ben-Meir

Pundits and policymakers today are frantically grappling with the various pros and cons concerning the Palestinian Authority's intent to seek recognition from the United Nations General Assembly in September. Regardless of the merit or wisdom behind such a move, the Palestinians seem determined to proceed with their plans unless a viable alternative is provided that could lead to the same result - the establishment of a Palestinian state - within a reasonable, and credible, timeframe. Although the detractors and the supporters of the plans among Israelis and Palestinians make convincing arguments to back up their positions, neither side has been willing or able to agree to rules of engagement to support their professed desire to enter into serious negotiations to conclude a peace agreement that meet each other's principal requirements.

No serious observer of the 'Israeli-Palestinian peace process' should have any doubt that both the Netanyahu government and the Palestinian Authority have been pursuing self-destructive policies during the past 30 months. President Obama's failure to persuade the Israelis and Palestinians to reengage in serious negotiations has added another significant layer of uncertainty to an already untenable environment. And the decision of the PA to go to the United Nations to seek recognition of a Palestinian state is likely to make matters worse, leading both sides to further entrench themselves into longtime, hardened positions which could lead to a renewed cycle of wide-spread violence.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been working hard to create a posture that suggests that he is ready, willing and able to enter immediately into peace negotiations, if only PA President Mahmoud Abbas would return to the negotiating table "unconditionally." But then Netanyahu has set his own conditions which serve as new obstacles to negotiations: He demands that Israel be recognized "as a Jewish state" at the outset of negotiations, even though this was never a requirement in previous peace negotiations with the Palestinians.

He refuses to accept the 1967 borders as the base line for negotiating a two-state solution with some land swap. He insists that Jerusalem's future status is not negotiable and that Israel must be allowed to maintain residual forces along the Jordan River. Meanwhile, Netanyahu has refused to consider an even nominal renewal of the settlement construction freeze to test Abbas' resolve to enter into serious negotiations.

In reality, Netanyahu has said little and done less to convince the Palestinians that his professed desire for a two-state solution is genuine. He has skillfully led his

public into believing that the status quo is sustainable and perhaps even beneficial for the State of Israel. Of course, the heinous and abhorrent terrorist attack in Eilat and the exchange of fire between Israel and Hamas along the Gaza border have shown otherwise. To be sure, Netanyahu has given the Palestinians plenty of ammunition to make the argument that there is no genuine Israeli partner.

Even so, Netanyahu's popularity is soaring in Israel. To many Israelis he appears to be the kind of 'tough' leader that is needed to navigate Israel through its equally 'tough' neighborhood. Yet in reality, he is not delivering to improve the prospects for real peace that most Israelis yearn for. As a result, Israel is becoming more isolated than ever in the international arena. Its relationship with the United States is fractured. And negative public opinion of Israel in Europe has dipped to unprecedented depths.

Tragically the Palestinians have not fared any better. They have continued their campaign to distort the history of the conflict. They have been working day-in and day-

"Both Israel and the Palestinians have become victims of their own self-destructive policies undermining the very premise on which a lasting peace could be erected [...] Both must put their cards on the table [...]"

out to perpetuate the fantasy of a return of Palestinian refugees to Israel, giving Israel no reason to believe that a two-state solution will indeed be the endgame of the conflict.

Furthermore, they have miserably failed to demonstrate a united front truly committed to a lasting peace. Hamas, in spite of the so-called "unity" agreement, which is faltering and has become a major liability for the PA, continues to preach the gospel of Israel's destruction and refuses to renounce violence as a means to achieve their national objective. Moreover, contrary to Abbas' revisionism in his May 16th op-ed in The New York Times, it was the Palestinians who refused to accept the UN partition plan in 1947 and it was the Arab states that declared war on Israel in 1948.

To be sure, neither side has been willing or able to agree to rules of good-faith negotiations to support their

professed desire to enter into serious talks to conclude a peace agreement that meet each other's principal requirements of security and political independence.

The phenomenon of the frantic lead up to the UN General Assembly has been striking. The success of the Prime Minister Salaam Fayyad's state-building enterprise has led to rising international support for the Palestinian statehood initiative. And since the Palestinians do not believe that Netanyahu is sincere about two-state solution, they are equally convinced that Obama's failure to persuade or pressure Netanyahu to change his posture has undercut his ability to effectively mediate the conflict.

Hence they were left with "no choice" but to turn to the UN in an effort to achieve statehood. Recognition of statehood by the UN, they insist, will internationalize the Palestinian problem and open the door for other players, such as the EU to play a more active role.

The idea, as Mahmoud Abbas has stated, is to level the playing field, and to re-enter negotiations with Israel as equals. In the process, statehood will presumably enable the Palestinians to pressure Israel through the International Criminal Court and other international forums. Abbas has been further emboldened by the fact that of the world's 20 most populated nations, only five, the United States, Japan, Mexico, Germany and Thailand, have yet to recognize Palestine.

However sincere or contrived the UN initiative may be, what will happen the day after the UNGA could be more ominous than the Palestinians have ever contemplated.

Israel may annex significant parts of the West Bank, as was proposed by MK Danny Danon in retaliation to a UN vote, which would likely ignite a violent and defensive reaction from Palestinians. Israel may further respond by withholding tax transfers collected from Palestinian workers to the Palestinian Authority.

The United States Congress will likely be driven to halt aid for the Palestinian Authority and for the security forces, should they not continue cooperation with Israel. This could add fuel to an already major financial crisis facing the Palestinian Authority. Even if the aid from the US and other Western donors is not cut completely, the Palestinians already have been experiencing a financial test—after a UN vote it will likely only get considerably worse.

Furthermore, with expectations elevated that a Palestinian independence day of celebration is on the horizon, the disappointment among Palestinians when the Israeli occupation continues unfettered beyond September's UN General Assembly recognition of a Palestinian state will be palpable.

Mahmoud Abbas has painted himself into a corner. Reversing the progress made in the West Bank could be a dangerous course of action. Already, protests are being planned similar to those conducted on "Nakba" day. What may start as a non-violent movement could lead to a third violent intifada.

In addition, there are three other significant consequences to the Palestinian plan.

First, the clear consequences of the UN plan is the reduced influence of the United States. Long believed to be the only credible mediator of the Arab-Israeli dispute, the internationalization of the conflict serves as a de facto vote of no confidence in the Obama administration's ability to bring the parties back to the negotiating table with a chance to succeed in reaching an equitable peace agreement.

Second, Israel would face an unprecedented wave of delegitimization efforts. Increasingly the international community will join in solidarity with the Palestinians, whether for demonstrations in the newly declared "state" of Palestine, boycotts of Israeli products, or in supporting putting Israel on trial at international criminal courts. Furthermore, the marginalization of the United States which will further decrease its influence the Arab-Israeli arena is likely and as a result increase the tensions between Washington and Jerusalem.

Finally, the Palestinians will face critical test. After a systematic two-year period in which the Palestinian leadership has devoted itself to prepare for statehood, where will the Palestinian public now turn to advance the Palestinian national cause and put an end to Israeli occupation? The test for the PA will be managing the strategy for the post-UNGA environment alongside the elevated expectations that have come with the international push to recognize Palestine. All the while, the PA will be challenged from its rival Hamas and other extremists groups who are ready, willing and prepared a return to violence as a means to advance the Palestinian agenda, a ploy that could have horrific consequences for the Palestinian people.

Both Israel and the Palestinians have become victims of their own self-destructive policies undermining the very premise on which a lasting peace could be erected. If Netanyahu and Abbas want to prevent the UN from taking any action that would equally damage their national interests, they must agree to the realistic proposals set forth by President Obama, with the support of the Quartet, to start negotiations with borders and security. Both must put their cards on the table and demonstrate that they are ready, willing and able to make the necessary concessions that could lead to a lasting peace agreement.

Reaching such a compromise, which may ultimately be inevitable, before the UNGA acts on the Palestinian request next month, is essential if both Israelis and Palestinians are to be prevented from racing towards a new quagmire with unpredictable consequences.



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Dr. Ben-Meir writes weekly articles, including a syndicated column in the Jerusalem Post. His articles have appeared in scores of newspapers, magazines and websites including the Middle East Times, the Christian Science Monitor, Le Monde, American Chronicle, the Political Quarterly, Israel Policy Forum, Gulf Times, the Harvard Review, and the World Policy Journal. He makes regular television and radio appearances, and has been featured on networks such as ABC, Al Jazeera (English and Arabic), Al Arabiya, CNN, FOX, NPR, PBS and Russia Today.

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