

Perspectives

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UN's Palestine Vote: *The Aftermath*

by Amb. Wendy Chamberlin

Two weeks after Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas submitted his proposed resolution to the UN Security Council to recognize Palestine as the 194th member state, the council took up discussion of the request. At the same time the Quartet – Russia, the U.S., the EU and the UN – met in Brussels to discuss their plan to revive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Whether the Quartet succeeds in getting the two sides back into direct talks within a month, as their plan calls for, is doubtful given the continuing impasse over the issue of settlements.

What is clear, however, is that Abbas' effort to achieve Palestinian membership status in the UN has not had the catastrophic impact on Israel's security that some alarmists had predicted. There was no "violence and bloodletting" on the day after the resolution was introduced as predicted by Israel's Foreign Minister Avidgor Liberman. To the contrary the emotional week in September has stimulated some positive movement.

The moribund peace process is grinding into motion; the Quartet is energized; Mahmoud Abbas was redeemed as a leader and the rejectionist Hamas diminished. Prime Minister Netanyahu responded to criticism for dangerously isolating Israel in world opinion by taking the risk to back the prisoner swap that finally, at long last, won the release of Gilad Shalit. At some point the United States will have another opportunity to reassess its opposition to Palestinian UN membership. This time it should support UN status.

There is a strong case to be made that the Palestinian Authority has proven itself to be deserving of UN status. For the past few years, Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad has worked doggedly to build the institutions of a Palestinian state in the West Bank. His declared intention all along was to seek international acknowledgment. Indeed, Palestinian success in improving the economy, governance, and even security that benefits Israel, has now won widespread international support. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank have declared the Palestinian Authority ready to assume the responsibility of statehood. Even senior Israeli officials decry the threats from the US congress to cut aid programs to the West Bank that have demonstrably worked to strengthen Israel's security.

The international community supports Palestinian UN status. By all accounts the large majority of states in the General Assembly support Palestinian Observer Status. So do most so-called super-powers. Indeed, the statement the Quartet issued immediately following Abbas' UN move asserted that they would urge a resumption of negotiations

within one month on the basis of all the relevant UN Security Council resolutions (242, 338. etc.) as well as the Quartet's 2003 Roadmap. The never-implemented Roadmap explicitly calls upon Quartet members to "promote international recognition of a Palestinian state, including possible UN membership," in Phase II, or the transition phase of the plan, not in Phase III, when a permanent status agreement should be reached.

There are few risks to Palestinian membership. A UN vote on Palestinian statehood is a largely symbolic gesture. It can neither change the basic dynamic of the Israel-Palestinian relationship, nor endanger prospects for a return to the direct negotiations that all sides agree is the only way to arrive at a permanent settlement. Abbas has regularly underscored the Palestinians' commitment to returning to talks after the vote. "No matter what happens at the United Nations," Abbas recently told *The New York Times*, "we have to return to negotiations."

Israel's security would not be jeopardized by the UN move. Unlike a decade ago, Palestinian leaders have pledged their commitment to using non-violent means to achieve their goals. Similarly, U.S. support for direct negotiations is unquestionable – as is its commitment to Israel's security.

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"The only way of getting a lasting solution is through direct negotiations between the parties and the route to that lies in Jerusalem and Ramallah, not in New York," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said last month. "The issue is not simply that action in New York will not bring peace and stability," she asserted, "but it will create more distractions toward achieving that goal."

If by "distraction" Clinton meant that the Palestinians would feel more empowered in negotiations, that should not necessarily be viewed as a negative development, given the huge asymmetry in the clout each side brings to the

table.

The Palestinian hope is that even getting a General Assembly vote on Observer status will give them enhanced leverage when direct talks resume. It is difficult to see how such an outcome would actually affect Israel's security or threaten its core interests.

Everyone recognizes the basic issues will still need to be negotiated; the U.S. will still guarantee Israel's security, and the Palestine Liberation Organization will still have to uphold its part of previous accords signed with the Israelis – particularly on security cooperation.

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This public ire in the Arab and Muslim world, though, didn't matter all that much in the era of autocrats like Hosni Mubarak – who could shape their foreign policies according to strategic interests without regard to public opinion.

The Arab Spring is changing all that. Publicly supported governments are likely to be far more attentive to the mood of the street. We saw an early indication of what is to come when the Egyptian authorities waited hours before intervening to stop the assault on the Israeli embassy.

Even longtime U.S. friends, like Saudi Prince Turk Al Faisal and Jordan's King Abdullah, warn that Arab tolerance of U.S. unconditional support for Israel has its limits.

Washington lost credibility in the region in February, when it trampled its longstanding opposition to Israeli settlements with the lone no vote on the draft Security Council resolution condemning their continued growth. It risks another blow with a veto of the Palestinian statehood resolution.

Now, more than ever, with the region in a delicate period of transition and with Arab liberals – many of whom are inclined to be pro-Western – competing with Islamists and Arab nationalists to shape a more democratic Arab world, the U.S. badly needs to be on the right side of history.

Washington must take care that it does not confuse support for Israel's security with blanket defense of Israel's policies. In that vein, it was laudable that the Obama Administration sharply denounced Israel's just-announced plans to build 1,100 more housing units in Gilo, a southern suburb of Jerusalem.

The Quartet plan calls on both sides to “refrain from provocative actions” and cites their obligations under the Roadmap which required Israel to freeze settlement activity and the Palestinians to halt all violence. But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has rejected another settlement freeze after a 10-month moratorium on new building expired in September 2010, leading the Palestinians to break off talks.

If past is prologue, Israel will ignore the U.S. and Quartet denunciations and suffer no direct consequences for its continued provocations. On the other hand, such persistence regarding settlement activity can only isolate Israel even further from erstwhile friends such as Egypt and Turkey, a trend U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta

recently said was “not a good situation for Israel.” Of course, the current stalemate is even less of a “good situation” for the Palestinians. If nothing else, their drive for UN recognition has prodded the U.S. and the Quartet to a flurry of activity that, one can hope, might actually lead to useful talks this time around.



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Chamberlin has extensive experience in counter-terrorism, having served as Director of Global Affairs and Counter-Terrorism at the National Security Council (1991-1993) and as Deputy in the Bureau of International Counter-Narcotics and Law Programs (1999-2001).

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