

September 2011

The Palestinian Statehood Gambit at the United Nations

This fall, the Palestinians are substituting showmanship at the United Nations for the real work of negotiating peace with Israel. This gambit could harm both U.S. peace efforts and Israel's standing in the international arena. Below are some frequently asked questions about the Palestinians' U.N. efforts and related issues.

Q: Is it true that the Palestinians have no choice but to go to the United Nations because negotiations with Israel have proven fruitless?

A: No. Israeli governments from across the political spectrum have always shown a willingness to compromise and promote peace. For example, Israel withdrew from 13 percent of the West Bank after Prime Minister Netanyahu signed the Wye accords in 1998. During the last decade, former Prime Ministers Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert offered to help create a Palestinian state in Gaza and virtually all of the West Bank. Unfortunately, the Palestinians walked away from the table.

Under the Oslo peace process, Israel recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), granted the Palestinians unprecedented authority over Gaza and parts of the West Bank and formally commenced negotiations designed to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The negotiations also enabled the Palestinians to establish a diplomatic relationship with the United States and receive billions of dollars in aid.

Q: Isn't Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu opposed to compromising with the Palestinians?

A: No. Netanyahu has repeatedly pledged his willingness to make painful concessions to the Palestinians. During the past two years, he has repeatedly called for direct talks without preconditions and said he is willing to travel to Ramallah at any time to negotiate. He also took other far-reaching steps to pave the way for such talks—calling for a Palestinian state, reducing barriers to movement in the West Bank and implementing an unprecedented 10-month moratorium on new West Bank housing construction.

Q: Can't the Palestinian U.N. effort just complement negotiations with Israel?

A: Maybe, if they were willing to negotiate. Though Abbas has said that the PA's "priority is negotiations," his continued refusal to meet with Netanyahu raises serious questions about his commitment to talks.

Abbas has previously threatened to extend diplomatic warfare beyond New York, a step that will further subvert talks. Abbas, in a May 16 *New York Times* op-ed, said recognition of a Palestinian state by the United Nations "would pave the way for the internationalization of the conflict as a legal matter, not only a political one. It would also pave the way for us to pursue claims against Israel at the

United Nations, human rights treaty bodies and the International Court of Justice.” Such conflict will diminish the prospect for talks and undermine future relations between the two sides.

Q: Is Israel worried about mass protests planned by the Palestinians to mark their statehood push at the United Nations?

A: Israel is not worried about peaceful protests and would like to continue high-level security cooperation with Palestinian Authority security officials. However, it is worried that such protests could spiral out of control and is preparing its soldiers to minimize casualties if protestors resort to violence. Earlier this year, thousands of Palestinians in Lebanon and Syria stormed Israel’s borders to protest Israel’s creation, which they define as a “catastrophe.” Casualties resulted when Israeli soldiers were forced to defend Israel’s sovereignty and themselves from the mobs seeking to infiltrate Israel. We just saw a week ago how a peaceful protest in Egypt turned into a violent mob that attacked the Israeli Embassy.

Friday prayers in Jerusalem have been a frequent venue for protests, with Jewish worshipers and Israeli soldiers facing a barrage of rocks. Weekly protests in the Palestinian village of Bilin against Israel’s separation barrier regularly feature rioting and stone-throwing. Last June, protestors attempted to use a bulldozer to dismantle the Israeli security fence aimed at protecting Israelis from terrorist attacks. And last year, an Israeli soldier lost an eye after being hit in the face with a rock hurled by a protestor.

Q: What is the administration’s position on the Palestinian efforts at the United Nations?

A: From President Obama on down, the administration opposes the Palestinian statehood efforts at the United Nations and has been urging other countries to oppose the move as well. The president said if the Palestinians bring their statehood bid to the Security Council the United States would “object very strongly, precisely because we think it would be counterproductive. We don’t think that it would actually lead to the outcome that we want, which is a two-state solution.”

The president, during a Sept. 12 Spanish-language media interview, added that the Palestinian effort at the United Nations is a “distraction” that “does not solve the problem.” He said the conflict is only going to “resolved by Israelis and Palestinians agreeing to something.”

Q: What are the possible consequences under U.S. law if the Palestinians continue to pursue statehood at the United Nations?

A: Should the Palestinians proceed with their bid for statehood at the United Nations, the United States could express its displeasure in any number of ways. The House and Senate have already overwhelmingly passed resolutions warning the Palestinians that there will be serious implications for U.S.-Palestinian relations and continued U.S. aid to the Palestinians if they continue their efforts at the United Nations. Currently, Congress is considering provisions that that would cut off U.S. economic aid and would make the continued operation of the PLO office in Washington conditional on an end to the PA’s efforts at the United Nations and an end to Palestinian incitement.

Q: Won’t cutting off aid harm the U.S.-Palestinian relationship and undermine the peace process?

A: The United States and Israel are not interested in taking punitive steps against the Palestinians. Both countries have been working for months to restart serious peace talks. However, if the Palestinians spurn talks there could be consequences.

The United States first established relations with the Palestinian Authority in 1993 on the understanding that it would pursue a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through direct negotiations with Israel. By abandoning the peace process in this way, the Palestinians have undermined the very basis of the U.S.-Palestinian relationship. Possible U.S. measures taken against the Palestinians for their failure to work constructively to start talks would not be meant to undermine the peace process, but to signal to the Palestinians that the right way to *restore* the peace process is for them to abandon their destructive activities and return to talks with Israel.