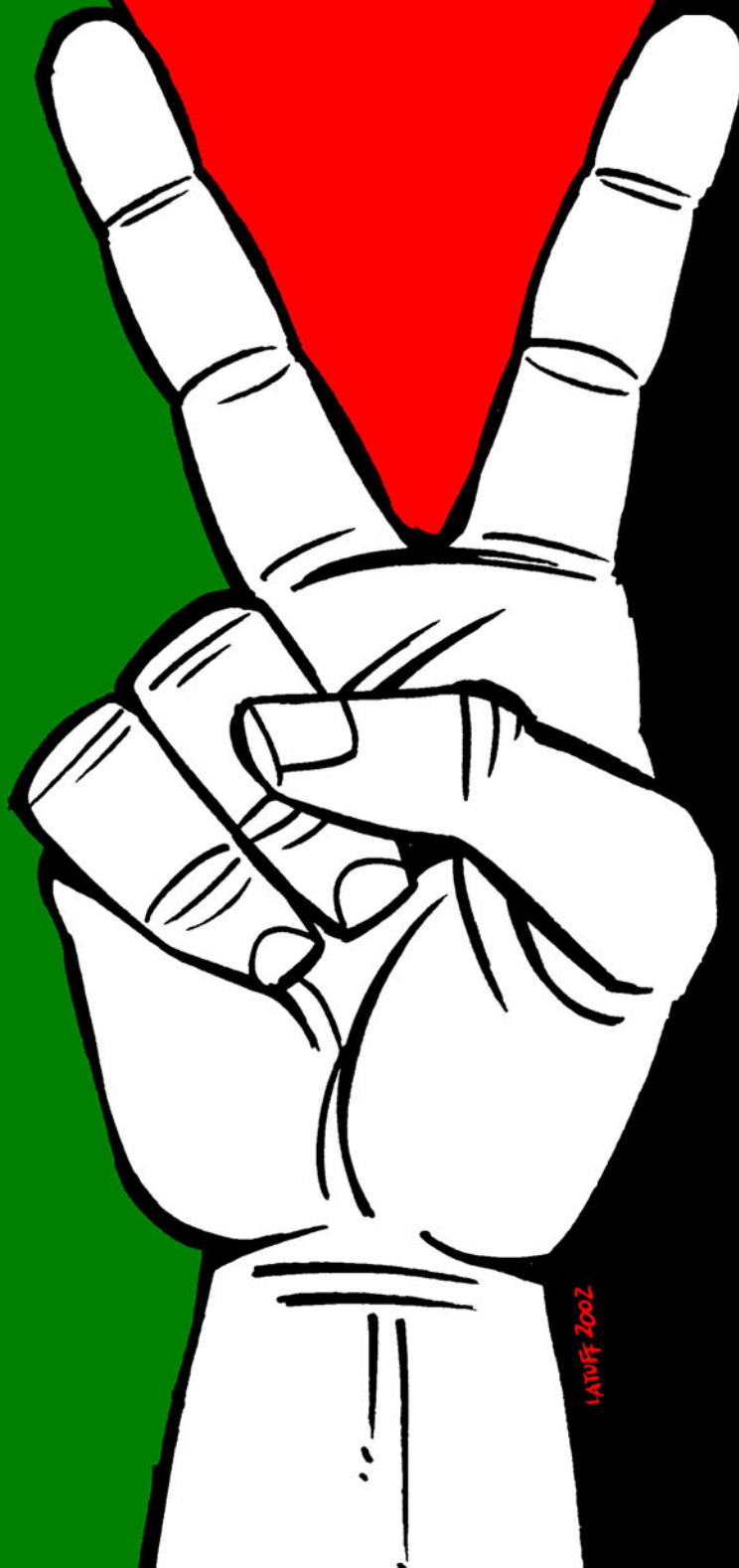


Welcome, Palestine?

**MPAC'S ANALYSIS ON THE UN RESOLUTION
FOR PALESTINIAN STATEHOOD**



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An MPAC Analysis on the United Nation's Resolution on Palestinian Statehood

This Friday, the [Palestinian National Authority](#) (PA) is planning to request formal recognition from the United Nations of Palestine, comprising the Occupied Territories (OT) of Gaza and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), as a . This is a momentous event with major implications for the region and for the possibility of a settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) is supportive of the Palestinian goal, as we have been in favor of a two-state solution since formally taking that stand in 2002. The following is an analysis of the situation along with recommendations for U.S. government policy-makers in response to the Palestinian initiative.

The Background

The [Palestine Liberation Organization](#) (PLO), which does not include Hamas, and therefore has a somewhat questionable claim to be the sole representative of the Palestinians, especially in Gaza, has been in negotiations with Israel for more than 20 years now. [The Oslo Accords](#) created a self-governing administrative body called the Palestinian Authority whose purpose was to allow Israel to remove its direct occupation of Palestinian cities and villages during the time it took for Israel and the PLO to negotiate the end of the conflict. However, Israel never offered a full withdrawal from the OT, a removal of the Jewish settlements built in the OT, which violate the Geneva Convention and therefore meet the legal definition of a war crime, or the creation of a fully sovereign Palestinian state. In addition, Israel has failed to offer reasonable resolution of the refugee issue, refused to acknowledge the rights of refugees to return to the homes that they or their parents were expelled from more than 60 years ago or offer compensation for their loss.

No Israeli government, whether Ehud Barak in 2000, [Ehud Olmert in 2007](#) or [Benjamin Netanyahu in 2010](#), has placed a serious offer on the table, making it clear to the Palestinians that there is no partner on the Israeli side who will end this conflict. It is clear that Israel's current coalition government remains politically dominated by the right wing and settler movement, and therefore there is no prospect of an Israeli government on its own reaching an equitable deal with the Palestinians. The last attempt at direct negotiations collapsed in September 2010 when the Israelis insisted on aggressively building more settlements while continuing meaningless and insincere discussions. Israel also added a new demand that Israel be recognized as a "Jewish state," despite the fact that more 20 percent of its babies are born to Muslim mothers and parents of other faiths and that no other country, including the U.S., Turkey or Egypt, recognizes Israel as a "Jewish state."

Since then, PA and PLO [President Mahmoud Abbas](#) has had to find a new course forward. Any hope that President Barack Obama would be willing to exert diplomatic leverage on behalf of peace was dashed when the U.S. was the only country to veto a UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution in February 2011 condemning the settlement activity. The fall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak also removed a key supporter of the PA in the Arab world, and highlighted how tenuous the legitimacy of the PA has become.

There is a deep desire among Palestinians to unify the PA-ruled West Bank and Hamas-ruled Gaza. Hamas notably came out against the UN gambit because they want a Palestinian state that includes all of historic Palestine -- not just Gaza and the West Bank. This obviously is not consistent with a two-state solution, which the PLO is pursuing and MPAC supports. Despite that, the PA has pursued a reconciliation agreement with Hamas; however, it remains unfinished and has not been implemented as of yet. MPAC would like to see fresh elections conducted in a fair and honest manner among all Palestinians to bring a truly legitimate and unified government back to power.

Implications from the UN Bid for Statehood

The Palestinians at this point have concluded that the Israeli government on its own will not end the occupation. They have also concluded that while Obama has good intentions and fully supports a two-state solution, he will not take any political risks to achieve that goal and will not put any pressure on Israel to reach a fair deal. So while the PLO remains committed to a two-state solution, it has no means in seeing it come to fruition.

Given this state of affairs, the Palestinians have decided to take the issue to the international community. Since 2010, more than 120 countries have recognized Palestine as a state drawn along the 1967 borders. The next step is to get formal recognition from the UN and receive full UN membership.

Tactically, there are three ways the Palestinians can move forward.

The first is through the UN Security Council. A vote there would be a direct showdown with the US, as it will be forced to veto that resolution. To do otherwise would require the US to completely dissolve a 63-year special alliance and commitment to Israel with huge domestic political consequences. Obama is certainly not prepared to do that, but at the same time, a US veto would markedly damage American standing in the Arab and Muslim world, with even the [Saudi warning](#) that the US is risking its alliance with Saudi Arabia. Given the Arab Spring, it would be difficult for any Arab nation to stand with the US after such a veto.

The second path is to get a two-thirds majority vote in the General Assembly, where there is no veto capability, under the ["Uniting For Peace" procedure](#), which would produce a nonbinding resolution in favor of granting Palestine UN membership and recognizing its statehood. The Palestinians were considering this option, but seem to be moving away from this approach.

The final option is to obtain a simple majority vote in the General Assembly that recognizes Palestine as "nonmember state" of the UN. The prospect for passage of that path looks promising, and even Israel's ambassador has said they cannot stop that. Israel's Defense Minister Barak has referred to this as a ["diplomatic tsunami"](#) heading toward Israel.

Both the US and Israel have been declaring this UN gambit to be an empty and meaningless symbolic gesture. If they indeed felt this way, they would not be working so hard to stop it, nor would Congress be threatening to cut off funds to the PA if they pursue their goal through this route.

A Palestinian success at the UN would be far more than just symbolic; it would provide a whole series of tangible benefits to the Palestinians. First, it would restore the issue of Palestine to the front of the world's attention. From 9/11 to the Iraq War to the Arab Spring, the Palestinians have struggled to maintain relevance and attention on their real issue of grievances. It would force all players, from the PA to Israel to the [European Union](#) (EU), and even Hamas and the US, to reassess the political landscape and the route forward.

Secondly, it clearly moves the Palestinians to a nation-state status and will grant huge legitimacy to the Palestinian demand for immediate statehood when nations such as China, Russia, France and Brazil vote in favor. It would further change the dynamic of future negotiations between the PLO and Israel to that of two states talking to each other.

The bid comes at a perfect time diplomatically to further pressure Israel. Israeli relations with Turkey, Egypt and Jordan have all recently deteriorated sharply. These nations all recognize Palestine and are committed to a two-state solution, so their reassessment of ties toward Israel is significant.

UN recognition of a Palestinian state is not merely symbolic; it would give the Palestinians a chance to participate in many international forums such as UN Human Rights bodies, International Court of Justice and even the International Criminal Court. Palestine could potentially lodge war crimes charges against Israeli politicians and generals for actions and policies such as [Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in 2009](#).

UN recognition would also grant great legitimacy to the "bottom-up" state-building efforts pursued by [Prime Minister Salam Fayyad](#) for the past two years. [Hussein Ibish](#), senior fellow at the American Task Force for Palestine, said, "[Left on its own, the state-building plan has been little more than a development project under occupation. This has given the leadership a sense of urgency that has impelled its turn towards possible statehood initiatives at the UN.](#)"

A success at the UN would strengthen the PA and Abbas in their competition with Hamas. Although a reconciliation agreement is still in the works, the Palestinians remain deeply divided, and Hamas opposes the move to the UN. If the UN votes in favor, it will greatly lift Abbas' political standing and perhaps put him in a stronger position to bring Gaza and the West Bank back together. Ultimately, only free elections can legitimize a new and unified Palestinian leadership, but both sides up to now have had reasons to avoid undergoing that test.

Finally, a success at the UN could support a Palestinian Spring made up of peaceful protests against the occupation. While Israel has dealt a heavy hand toward all forms of protest, as Amos Gilad, the Political Military Chief at the Ministry of Defense noted, "[We don't do Gandhi very well.](#)" The Israelis are truly apprehensive about widespread, peaceful Palestinian protests.

U.S. Policy Recommendations

How should the U.S. respond to this UN strategy? Currently the approach appears to be for Congress to threaten the PA with aid cutoff, while the White House tries to talk the Palestinians out of this idea. This is unlikely to work. Loss of U.S. funds will likely be made

up from Arab or EU sources, as the Palestinians have begun to feel that the path to freedom no longer runs through the White House, at least for now. There is little that the Obama Administration can offer the Palestinians as an inducement to give up this strategy, especially after 120 nations have already recognized them.

After UN recognition, the conflict cannot simply end with Israel withdrawing to the 1967 border. While the Israelis would like to swap some bits of land to allow them to keep some settlers in place, UN recognition does not deal with refugee issues in any way favorable to the Palestinians. Additionally, the Israelis would never accept any border that places the Western Wall under Palestinian control. This means that meaningful negotiations will still be necessary under any scenario, which is why the Palestinians see this as validating a negotiated two-state solution, not hindering it.

If the Palestinians go to the Security Council, a U.S. veto is certain. What the U.S. would like is to avoid a 14-1 vote, and hope to pick up some support from other nations to somewhat blunt how out of step with global public opinion the U.S. is on this issue. In the General Assembly, it is highly likely that the Palestinians will win a vote in their favor. In fact, it would be rather detrimental for the U.S. to expend vast amounts of political capital to defeat this in the General Assembly. Rather, it may be wiser to actually abstain in the General Assembly vote, thereby providing Israel its crucial veto in the Security Council, but signaling to both Arabs and Israelis that the U.S. does want a Palestinian state in the final analysis along the 1967 borders.

If the U.S. wants to completely stop this whole UN process, then it must come to terms with the reality of Israeli intransigence. While the left in Israel is supportive of a sustainable two-state solution, it simply has no prospect of achieving electoral success. The right, along with the 500,000 settlers living in the West Bank (10 percent of Israel's Jews live on occupied Palestinian land), have no intention of dismantling Israel's domination of the West Bank and allowing a real Palestinian state. Is President Obama prepared to present a solution backed by the EU, Russia and the UNSC as a *fait accompli* to Israel? Furthermore, are they prepared to present one that demands a dismantling of the settlements, a fully sovereign Palestine and return of East Jerusalem? If security is truly an issue, the U.S. and/or NATO should sign a security treaty with Israel. Such an imposed solution is perhaps the only other way forward that has even the slightest chance of success. Impending elections make it unlikely that President Obama would embark on such a bold course, but perhaps if he were re-elected he would strongly reconsider. At that point, the leverage of telling the Israelis a U.S. veto would not be automatic in the Security Council or recognizing Palestine may be the shove that is needed to resolve this conflict.



Founded in 1988, MPAC is an American institution which informs and shapes public opinion and policy by serving as a trusted resource to decision makers in government, media and policy institutions. MPAC is also committed to developing leaders with the purpose of enhancing the political and civic participation of American Muslims.

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