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Pal^estine

The Palestinian UN Statehood Initiative: What's At Stake?

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On September 21, 2011 the Palestinian Authority and Palestine Liberation Organization intend to take an appeal for statehood recognition to the United Nations Security Council. When that is rejected – as it will be, since the Obama Administration has promised to veto it – the PA is expected to turn to the General Assembly, where there's no great-power veto, for “non-member observer state” status which will give it access to UN institutions, including the ability to bring charges against Israeli occupation practices.

On one level, this may look like a purely symbolic gesture by the feeble PA/PLO leadership of Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen). No one believes it will change the situation on the ground – the blockade of Gaza, the cancer of Israeli colonial settlements in the West Bank, the apartheid-annexation Wall, the imprisonment of thousands of Palestinian activists and hundreds of children, and for that matter the police-state behavior of the PA's own security forces. It certainly will not bring about the return of Palestinian refugees uprooted from their homes in successive rounds of Israeli ethnic cleansing.

Some Palestinian activists, for these reasons and because of their rightful distrust of the Palestinian Authority for its corruption and endless compromises, believe that taking the Palestinian statehood claim to the UN at this time is useless – or even worse, that the PA might surrender fundamental principles, e.g. giving away the Right of Return or “recognizing Israel as the Jewish State,” in exchange for some empty promises that will be worthless in the end anyway. Such fears are not groundless, and the discussion among Palestinians about their road forward is an important one.

For the Palestinians' allies, however, and especially for activists in the United States, we believe the central issue is a different one. For any possible progress to occur toward justice and peace in the Palestine-Israel conflict, it is essential that the governments of Israel and the United States suffer a huge political defeat.

That is why the fight at the UN is important – and not about whether any of us may think that a “one-state” or “two-state solution” or whatever is possible or desirable at the moment. What's happening is that the grotesque and obscene policies of successive U.S. governments, Republican and Democratic, are coming home to roost – and it's about time, too.

Since 1967, Washington has been on record for UN Resolution 242, calling for Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), and opposed to Israeli settlements which in any case are all illegal under international legal conventions on the obligations of occupying powers. Ever since the 1991-'93 Madrid and Oslo Accords, the United States has been on record for the two-state formula of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. And during this period and especially in recent years, the Palestinian Authority has desperately desired nothing more than to be a loyal U.S. client and has futilely banked on U.S. promises to deliver an independent state through the “peace process.”

Instead, the United States has funded the Israeli occupation through its \$3 billion annual military aid package. It has vetoed every attempt at the UN to censure Israeli settlements. It has blocked cease-fire resolutions when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 and again in 2006, until Israel signaled it was ready to stop fighting. And it has rigged the “peace process” in order to make sure that “the peace process” lasts forever but never produces peace. Meanwhile Israeli settlements, the expanded “metropolitan Jerusalem,” the annexation Wall and apartheid roads have carved up the projected Palestinian state till only fragmented Bantustan-type population enclaves remain. The past twenty years are littered with so many lies and “road maps” to nowhere that even the experts lose count.

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When the Palestinians held a democratic election in 2006 and chose a Hamas majority, the United States and Israel attempted a coup that was supposed to restore the “moderate” Abu Mazen to power. Ultimately, however, even the most conservative Palestinian nationalists have had enough American knives stuck in their backs. Disgusted with U.S. deceit, under pressure from their own population and pushed along by the power of the Arab Spring, this Palestinian leadership – far from a militant or revolutionary one – is disobeying the Obama administration’s orders.

The pressure is intense. “The road to Palestinian statehood does not go through New York [the United Nations],” declares Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, who has done everything in her power to make sure the road goes nowhere at all. Instead, statehood can come “only through direct negotiations” under conditions dictated by the U.S. and Israeli masters. And what conditions! The United States Congress, Democrats and Republicans, with the smallest handful of exceptions, jumped up and down like so many trained chimpanzees when the Prime Minister of Israel openly denounced and disrespected president Obama’s call for freezing (let alone dismantling) settlements. Now this same Congress threatens to cut off all U.S. aid to the PA for daring to seek UN endorsement of what is, on paper, official United States policy.

In a startling New York Times op-ed (September 12), a prominent former Saudi Arabian government official Turki al-Faisal wrote:

“The United States must support the Palestinian bid for statehood at the United Nations this month or risk losing the little credibility it has in the Arab world. If it does not, American influence will decline further, Israeli security will be undermined and Iran will be empowered... Moreover, Saudi Arabia would no longer be able to cooperate with America in the same way it historically has. With most of the Arab world in upheaval, the 'special relationship' between Saudi Arabia and the United States would increasingly be seen as toxic by the vast majority of Arabs and Muslims, who demand justice for the Palestinian people.

“Saudi leaders would be forced by domestic and regional pressures to adopt a far more independent and assertive foreign policy. Like our recent military support for Bahrain's monarchy, which America opposed, Saudi Arabia would pursue other policies at odds with those of the United States, including opposing the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in Iraq and refusing to open an embassy there despite American pressure to do so. The Saudi government might part ways with Washington in Afghanistan and Yemen as well.”

To be sure, the threat of breaking the Saudi-U.S. alliance is not to be taken seriously. The point, however, is that the most reactionary (and indeed anti-Palestinian) of Arab regimes is fearful of the popular backlash over the United States’ Israel-uber-alles policy. And that U.S. policy will only change if it becomes clear that Israel is becoming an imperialist strategic liability rather than asset.

There’s been a lot of talk in recent years about “civil society” bringing about meaningful change. Well, Palestinian civil society has been on record for the past six years calling for international BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) against Israeli apartheid and occupation institutions. It’s time for U.S. “civil society” to stand up too. The United States and Israeli governments are afraid of their impending isolation, not because it’s a military threat – which they know how to handle – but because it will be a sign of weakening U.S. authority in the Middle East and the world. Yes, it will be a serious defeat, and they have it coming and then some.