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Looking Ahead to September: Israel, the EU, and the “Moral Majority”

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In his appearance before the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, the prime minister stated that “no one has the power to stop the decision in September at the UN General Assembly to recognize a Palestinian state. . . We expect to receive support from only a few countries.” In light of the balance of power in the UN, this assessment is not surprising. Since (as it appears today) the chances are slim that the Palestinians will reverse their intention to submit a resolution in September on recognition, the United States and Israel will concentrate their efforts on enlarging the “moral majority,” that is, democratic states that will not support the resolution. The bulk of the effort will presumably focus on members of the European Union and other Western countries. Israel expects these states to use their moral discretion, i.e., abstain or vote against recognition of a Palestinian state.

Before assessing prospects for the success of this effort, it is worthwhile to examine Israeli and EU positions on some issues related to the political process and resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The ramifications of the “Arab spring” for the political process: The government of Israel sees the uncertainty regarding developments in the region and the ensuing risks as reason to postpone decisions of a strategic nature. By contrast, the European Union sees the current situation as an opportunity (more urgent than before) to promote the peace process. In a speech to the Security Council in February, for example, the British representative claimed that it would be a disgrace if in light of what was happening in the area Palestinian hopes were not realized.

September as a target date for completing negotiations on a permanent agreement: Not only does Israel (correctly) not accept this coming September as a realistic target date – set by the Quartet and President Obama – for completing negotiations on a permanent settlement; it believes that the current circumstances are not ripe for a comprehensive agreement. The European Union, on the other hand, steadfastly repeats the need to conclude negotiations on the two-state solution by September (even now, when it is clear

that the chances of meeting the target date are poor) in order to accept Palestine as a full member of the United Nations. An additional reason for the vote in September is connected to the successful (?) completion of the Fayyad plan for state building.

The permanent Israeli-Palestinian border: In his speech to Congress, Prime Minister Netanyahu made clear his position rejecting the 1967 lines – for reasons of security and demography – as the basis for a future border. The European Union, however, sees the 1967 lines, including East Jerusalem, as the basis for a future border, with the possibility, if the two parties agree, for equal land swaps.

Future security arrangements: The Prime Minister stated that Israel's particular (i.e., small) size demands unique security arrangements. Hence, he argued, the need for a long term Israeli military presence in the Jordan Valley and the full demilitarization of the Palestinian state with on-the-ground security arrangements. The European Union makes do with general statement that security arrangements must respect Palestinian sovereignty and underscore that the occupation has ended, and at the same time ensure Israel's security, inter alia, by preventing the renewal of terrorism and addressing the threats that arise. (When details of the EU position are publicized, they will likely differ sharply from Israel's position.)

The Palestinian refugees: In his speech to Congress, the Prime Minister reiterated unequivocally that the problem of the Palestinian refugees must be solved outside the borders of Israel. The European Union argues that it is necessary to find a just, fair, and conclusive solution to the problem.

Recognition of Israel's Jewish character: Israel's condition that it be recognized as a Jewish state does not have the unequivocal support of the European Union, and it is doubtful that it will receive it in the future (Germany, for example, supports recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, but it does not demand this recognition from the Palestinians as a condition for resuming the negotiations. It is possible that France, too, now advocates "two states for two peoples").

Jerusalem: The Prime Minister has argued that Jerusalem must not be divided again and must remain the united capital of Israel. He also said that with creativity and good will, it will be possible to reach a solution to this difficult issue that is acceptable to the Palestinian point of view. The European Union, on other hand, sees the annexation of East Jerusalem and Israel's continued building there as violations of international law, and it believes that Jerusalem's status as a future capital of the two states must be resolved through negotiations.

Internal Palestinian reconciliation: The prime minister called upon/demanded of Abu Mazen that he annul the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement, and he emphasized that Israel will not conduct negotiations with a Palestinian government supported by a Palestinian version of al-Qaeda. The European Union highlights the essential need to

repair the internal Palestinian rift as a condition for advancing an agreement. Furthermore, it accepts Abu Mazen's position that he is the Palestinian representative for political negotiations, while at the same time, it calls on the Palestinian government to accept the Quartet's conditions (without mentioning the Quartet by name, and without stating that adoption of these conditions is a precondition for discussions).

A comparison of their positions thus reveals fundamental gaps between Israel and the European Union, and it is doubtful that they can be overcome in the current circumstances. The EU's hopes that Prime Minister Netanyahu would demonstrate flexibility and openness in front of Congress – which would make possible the renewal of negotiations – were dashed. By contrast, the EU welcomed President Obama's address on the Middle East, which included important elements on the renewal of negotiations. The EU is quite cognizant that the United States plays the leading role in the conflict resolution efforts, and it is eager to coordinate policy with the US. However, the positions of the EU and the US administration are not identical, and the European Union is interested in demonstrating its independence from the United States. In the wake of President Obama's recent policy speech, the EU has made it clear that it will continue to advance its positions on the issues mentioned above.

The substantive differences of opinion between Israel and the European Union; the dissatisfaction among more than a few European leaders with the policies and conduct of the Israeli government; impatience in light of the ongoing stalemate; and the (unbalanced) ascribing of responsibility for the stalemate to Israel seemingly suggest that the EU, as a bloc, would support recognition of a Palestinian state (while it continues to endorse September as a target date for the state's establishment). However, it currently appears that this is not likely to happen. German Chancellor Merkel (and a number of other countries, including, apparently, Italy) has decided to oppose the draft resolution, based on opposition to unilateral steps by any one party as a means of solving the conflict. (The Chancellor's conduct is also an example of the fact that when the desire to demonstrate European Union solidarity conflicts with the national interest, the decision will favor the national interest.)

At the same time, the Chancellor's decision should decidedly not be understood as an expression of support for the policy of the Israeli government. She has expressed her criticism of Israel on a number of occasions in recent months, thereby deviating from her prior media restraint regarding public criticism of Israeli policy.

The split in the EU vote ensures that when the moment for the UN vote arrives, Israel will have other opposing votes (or abstentions) on "moral" grounds. However, the government of Israel will err if it sees this as a vote of confidence in its policy. Furthermore, it should be assumed that in light of the gaps between their positions, the dialogue between Israel and the European Union on the day after the vote will be more difficult, because of the possible ramifications resulting from the vote.