



INSS Insight No. 645, December 22, 2014

**The Palestinian Bid at the Security Council:
International and Domestic Ramifications for Israel**
Shimon Stein and Shlomo Brom

The decision by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to seek a UN Security Council resolution that would recognize a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and would require Israel's withdrawal from the territories by the end of 2017 has forced many countries, in the Middle East and around the world, to revisit the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and restore the issue yet again to the front burner. This development has inevitably also placed the political process with the Palestinians and Israeli-US relations over this issue at the top of Israel's public agenda, resulting in the Israeli-Palestinian political process becoming a hotly contested topic in the Israeli national election, slated for March 17, 2015.

The PLO's decision to turn to the Security Council is the result of a combination of factors: the ongoing deadlock in the political process, the failure of the last round of Israeli-Palestinian talks spearheaded by US Secretary of State John Kerry, and the sense (widespread among the Palestinians long before the declaration of early elections in Israel) that a political breakthrough is not on the horizon and that the Israeli government is not amenable to an agreement. At the same time, this is an attempt on Abbas' part to take advantage of the escalating tensions and violence between Israel and the Palestinians (while hoping that events do not spiral out of control and ignite an all-out conflagration) to promote a strategy designed to generate international recognition of a Palestinian state and impose a solution on Israel without direct negotiations. In addition, the Palestinian move in the Security Council is meant to challenge the United States, and in particular to test its tradition of vetoing resolutions relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The tense atmosphere between Israel and the Palestinians is exacerbated by recent events on the Temple Mount. Given the lack of response by the Israeli government to activities by right wing politicians at the site, these events are seen as a reflection of Israel's intention to undermine the longstanding status quo there. Moreover, the focus on Jerusalem has pushed Jordan, which views itself as the keeper of the site, to take several countermeasures, including the recall of its ambassador to Israel for consultations, an

emergency summit meeting in Amman to discuss developments, and use of its status as a member of the Security Council to back the Palestinian diplomatic bid at the UN.

The Israeli government has reacted to the Palestinian move at the Security Council with intensive diplomatic efforts to foil the bid, mostly by trying to persuade the US administration to veto the Palestinian resolution and any other version proposed in the Security Council. As part of these efforts, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu traveled to Rome for a special emergency meeting with John Kerry. The meeting was not followed by any public announcement, and thus the outcome of the meeting is still unknown.

To help extricate the United States from its dilemma, France, Great Britain, and Germany are working on a resolution that would allow Washington to avoid using its veto power. The proposal presumably focuses on the principles for resolving the conflict in the same spirit that Secretary of State Kerry used to try to elicit an agreement when he mediated the last round of talks between Israel and the Palestinians. It would set a two-year timetable for concluding the talks on a permanent settlement of the conflict. Indeed, the European initiative is in line with the current atmosphere in Europe that has prompted a wave of decisions recognizing the Palestinian state by several governments and parliaments.

Even if at this point it remains unclear how the Palestinian diplomatic effort will end and what its practical ramifications might be, the implications of these developments are not insignificant.

Netanyahu's decision to dissolve the government and head for new elections places the US administration in a bind regarding the potential impact of its decision about the resolution on the Israeli election campaign. Media reports indicate disagreement within the administration. Some support casting a veto so as not to provide Netanyahu and the Israeli political right with a reason to rally under the banner of "the whole world is against us" and draw the electorate more rightwards. Others are less worried about the effect that withholding the veto would have on Israeli voting trends, provided the resolution is one that the United States could live with. In their minds, the United States should work with the leading European nations on formulating the resolution. Kerry himself told reporters at the State Department that the United States would not have "any problem with [the Palestinians] filing some resolution, providing it's done in the spirit of working with people to see how we could proceed forward in a thoughtful way that solves the problem [and] doesn't make it worse."

The issue of US interference in Israeli national elections is not new. This time, though, the issue takes on a special twist given the difficult relationship between President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu. (Presumably the White House remembers

Netanyahu's support for Republican candidate Mitt Romney when Obama ran for reelection in 2012.) Regardless of administration considerations, a US refusal to veto a resolution formulated through dialogue between the United States and the European nations could have a positive effect on the Israeli election campaign, as this would force the respective Israeli political parties and the public in general to face the implications of a Security Council resolution that determines the parameters for discussing a final resolution. This would be very different from the previous election, which focused on social and economic issues and allowed the political parties and the electorate to avoid facing the critical issue of Israeli-Palestinian relations.

In the context of the public debate before the election, the issue of Israeli-US relations is also of fundamental importance. The public will have to decide between two diametrically opposed worldviews: one that sees the relationship between the two nations as a key component of Israel's strategic strength and deterrence, and that holds that the leader who damages these relations must be punished (which is what happened to Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, who was beaten by Yitzhak Rabin in the 1992 election), and one that sees Israel as "a nation that dwells alone" and maintains that friction with other nations simply reflects inherent, generic anti-Semitism. The proponents of the second view will support a political leader who promises to resist international pressure and the intention by the nations of the world to impose on Israel any policies and moves they view as inimical.

If the election results in a coalition government interested in genuine negotiations with the Palestinians, it can make use of the Security Council resolution and begin discussion of the core issues of the conflict while relying on the progress made in previous rounds of talks. This would be a stark departure from previous tradition, whereby any new Israeli government started talks from scratch. This resulted in Israeli governments having to decide on essential issues only at the ends of their terms, each time calling into question their ability to realize the agreements they had made and meet their commitments.

