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As world leaders gathered in New York City in mid-September for the annual talkfest that is the U.N. General Assembly, the hottest topic of conversation was a Palestinian proposal to apply for statehood. The Palestinians say this is their best hope of restarting stalled peace talks, but Israel has denounced the plan, arguing it compromises chances of direct negotiations. The Obama Administration has vowed to veto any resolution brought to the Security Council, but a vote in the General Assembly could give the Palestinians a symbolic victory: recognition as a nonmember observer state, similar to the Vatican. How would any outcome affect the possibility of peace between Israel and the Palestinians? TIME asked four respected commentators to weigh in.  
  
By Yossi Beilin  
  
It's being called a lot of things, the Palestinian bid for recognition as a state at the U.N., but in Israel the metaphor of choice is "train wreck." Israelis have been bracing for September for many months, ever since Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian National Authority, began hinting that without meaningful negotiations aimed at a two-state solution, the path forward ran to New York.  
  
As the momentum has mounted, Israel and its stalwart ally the U.S. have fumbled for a way to divert the Palestinian express. President Obama promised to veto any application for full membership in the Security Council and to lobby against any meaningful alternative status in the General Assembly. Members of the U.S. Congress threatened to punish the Palestinian Authority by severing $550 million in aid, and ministers in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition threatened to withhold the vital tax receipts Israel collects for the Palestinians. Others, also trying to be helpful, suggested a dramatic last-minute resumption of talks.  
  
But one way to prevent a train wreck is to climb on board. Israel should announce its support for a state of Palestine.  
  
Such an announcement would do what Netanyahu promised during the previous round of talks more than a year ago: "Surprise the world." Support for a state of Palestine would ring the same major chords as the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt or the surprise announcement of the Oslo accords, which I initiated. In a Middle East where the Arab Spring has made dignity a core value, it would also show respect. And, with the proper care, it would make immense sense for Israel itself.  
  
The U.N. is not where this conflict began, but it is where it was first made the world's business--internationalized, in the language of the day--and it is the place it can begin to be laid to its final rest. In 1947, the newly formed General Assembly voted to partition the disputed lands into two states: one Jewish, the other Arab. The Jews accepted, and Israel was admitted to the U.N. Now that the Palestinians are poised to accept as well, it's only sensible to accept them.  
  
Great care must be taken in the terms of the statehood resolution. The point of climbing aboard the train, after all, is to help steer or at least point out hazards on the track ahead. The one area of agreement between Palestinian and Israeli leaders is that the essential issues can be settled only by negotiation. So the measure put before the U.N. should be designed to keep moving the peace process that Israel's announcement will have brought back to life.  
  
The core issues are well worn from years of handling: Palestine's borders can be fixed only by agreement with Israel, and the basis of all negotiations for the past 20 years has been the lines on the map in June 1967, at the start of the Six-Day War. In Jerusalem, there would be two recognized capitals: one for Israel and one for the Palestinians. The security arrangements for both sides would be guaranteed and the problem of Palestinian refugees resolved, essentially, in the new Palestinian state.  
  
In fact, the elements of a U.N. resolution already exist in the second stage of the 2002 U.S. plan known as the road map to peace, which calls for a Palestinian state with provisional borders while negotiations proceed on a permanent-status agreement--and an Israeli freeze on construction in the settlements. Once the boundaries of the Palestinian state are agreed on, Israel will be free to build whatever it likes on its side while the matter of its full recognition of Palestine proceeds to the Security Council. There should be no worries about a veto there if the interlocutor through all of this is, as it should be, the U.S. History is calling. Surprises do not have to be unpleasant.  
  
By Richard Haass  
  
What's behind Mahmoud Abbas' decision to seek statehood? Frustration and desperation. The Palestinian leader may be seeking to stave off popular pressure before Arab Spring--style uprisings challenge his rule. Or he may be trying to prompt the U.S. to apply more pressure on Israel's hard-line government to compromise in on-again, off-again negotiations.  
  
But nonmember observer-state status, the most realistic outcome of Abbas' plan, would not bring a Palestinian state any closer to reality. More likely, any "victory" in the U.N. would come with a heavy price tag. Israelis could make life far more difficult by increasing security closures, expanding settlements or holding back funds. Also at risk: American aid. Israeli and American reactions could jeopardize the continued success of a Palestinian economy that is projected to grow at 7%. Any satisfaction with a U.N. vote could quickly turn to frustration.  
  
Others would lose as well. An American veto would be wildly unpopular in the Arab world. It would sharply increase the odds that the new government in Egypt would be anti-American. Popular protests in the Arab world would also prove costly to Israel. It could place the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in jeopardy and do the same for Israel's relations with Jordan.  
  
It may not be too late to head off these dire outcomes. The Security Council will likely take weeks to consider Abbas' application. The "Quartet" overseeing Middle East diplomacy--the U.S., Russia, the U.N. and the European Union--could use this time to restart negotiations.  
  
Israel should use any pause to reassess its current strategy. Israeli security can be understood as consisting of three concentric circles: an inner circle of Palestinians; a middle circle of Israel's neighbors; and an outer circle including the rest of the Arab world, Iran and an increasingly Islamist Turkey. Israel's security environment is clearly deteriorating in all three circles. Resolving the conflict with the Palestinians would allow Israel to focus on its most pressing threat: Iran's nuclear and missile programs.  
  
Resolving the Palestinian conflict, though, requires direct talks, the only proven method of advancing peace in the region. To be sure, negotiations would be exceedingly difficult, as they would have to resolve issues central to the dispute. It is well worth trying. A state is not a favor Israel would bestow on the Palestinians; it is a favor Israel would give to itself so that it could remain secure, Jewish, democratic and prosperous. Good strategy requires a willingness to set priorities and make trade-offs. It is understandable, but not enough, for Israelis to criticize the Palestinian decision to go to the U.N.; it is also incumbent on Israelis to show that negotiations can yield the ultimate prize of statehood if Palestinians are willing to meet them halfway.  
  
By Daoud Kuttab  
  
For years, Palestinians have been searching for a strategy that can produce freedom from decades of foreign military occupation. The two apparent options that were available to the Palestinian leadership were violent resistance or political negotiations. Yasser Arafat tried both without success. Mahmoud Abbas has been adamantly opposed to violence. Since taking over as President of the Palestinian National Authority, he has worked hard to change the inflammatory rhetoric of Palestinian politics and has backed Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's efforts to build up a Palestinian state instead of simply cursing the occupation.  
  
But all of Abbas' peaceful efforts have failed to produce substantive movement in the stalled peace talks. While Palestinians have been in direct negotiations with Israel since the Madrid peace conference in 1991, the past two years have failed to produce any progress on the key issue of borders. The Oslo accords signed in 1993 on the White House lawn promised a five-year interim agreement, which was supposed to lead to an independent Palestinian state. But Palestinians are no nearer to a state today than they were back then.  
  
The impasse over direct talks has given cover to Israeli expansionism. Palestinian lands continue to be confiscated, Jews-only settlements continue to be built, and the Israeli-constructed security wall strangulates the Palestinians. The International Court of Justice at the Hague ruled in 2004 that the wall built inside Palestinian territory is illegal according to international law, yet it continues to be a concrete example of the oppression of occupation.  
  
So Abbas has chosen a third way: the U.N. Taking the matter to New York plays to Palestinians' strength: overwhelming global support for their position. He believes international support for Palestinian statehood can change the current paradigm.  
  
With Palestine recognized as a state--even one with observer status--Palestinians could move in various international forums (including the International Court of Justice) against the Israeli occupiers. Every country that votes for Palestinian statehood will be morally obliged to take action against any party that is denying Palestine the right to be a fully functional and sovereign state.  
  
The Palestinian strategy is not without risks, however. Israel and the U.S. Congress have threatened financial retribution. But the Palestinian public has responded that their independence is not for sale. Hamas, which runs the Gaza Strip, has mixed feelings about Abbas' statehood gambit: although not ideologically against the U.N. move, Hamas has publicly opposed Abbas' plan because he did not adequately consult Hamas.  
  
No one is holding their breath as to what will happen at the U.N. In his speech to Palestinians before leaving for New York, Abbas admitted that the statehood resolution alone will not bring independence; he pleaded with Palestinians not to act violently following any U.N. decision. There is no question that Israel and its army will continue to rule Palestinian territories, no matter what the international community says. Negotiations will necessarily have to take place to end this conflict.  
  
The Palestinians' desire to get a U.N. vote on statehood, in whatever form, does not mean that they cannot have direct negotiations with Israel. But if all goes well, these talks will no longer be between Palestinians and their occupiers but between two states seeking to manage their relations in peace and harmony.  
  
By Uzi Landau  
  
When the Palestinians signed the Oslo accords in 1993, they were striking a fundamental deal with Israel: that every issue remaining between the two peoples would be resolved through negotiations. But now, by appealing directly to the U.N. to recognize a Palestinian state, Mahmoud Abbas is making a unilateral decision to abandon the discussion of outstanding issues with Israel, trying to avoid negotiations based on mutual compromise. He is violating not just several legal, binding agreements with Israel but also a major principle of international relations: that conflict can be resolved only through negotiations. He has decided that the time for talking is over.  
  
The Western governments that witnessed the signing of the Oslo accords and bear special responsibility for honoring them have not made it clear to Abbas that violating them is unacceptable. This has made the Palestinians feel that they can help themselves to a free lunch, that there is no price to be paid for this U.N. initiative. They believe they can only gain from it. Just days before the General Assembly session began, the Europeans were trying to appease them, asking them if they would be kind enough to rejoin the negotiations. Instead, Palestinians must receive a clear signal from the Europeans and North Americans that abandoning agreements doesn't pay.  
  
Abbas' flaunting of those past agreements means that he renders them null and void as far as Israel is concerned. The consequences for the Palestinians will be very serious. Should the Palestinian National Authority pursue its bid for statehood, it should fully understand that Israel will respond accordingly.  
  
Any suggestion of a future border with a Palestinian state based on the 1967 armistice line should now be out of the question. I'm reminded of what our legendary Foreign Minister Abba Eban said in 1969: the borders of Israel before the 1967 war, when Israel took control of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, are "Auschwitz" borders, because a country cannot defend itself from those lines. Israel's withdrawing to the 1967 lines would allow the Palestinians to cripple our economy and society with very primitive, short-range Katyusha rockets. The residence of the Israeli President would be a mile's distance from the enemy front line. We cannot permit that to happen.  
  
The conflict is not about the division of land between two equal and rival claims. It is about an existential threat to Israel. The Palestinians are unprepared to accept the right of the Jewish state to exist. Their tactics should come as no surprise to anyone. They have repeatedly walked away from opportunities to establish a state, always holding out for more in the hope that ultimately they will destroy the state of Israel. Abbas has recently made up with Hamas, the terrorist group that controls Gaza and is allied to and funded by Iran. In recent years, Abbas, a man who has denied the Holocaust ever happened, has repeatedly failed to reciprocate any of the good-faith measures Israel has made. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he would accept a Palestinian state on the condition that the Palestinians recognize us; they pocketed this without making a similar gesture. We created conditions for their economy to flourish, removing hundreds of roadblocks and checkpoints. What reciprocation did they make? The government declared a moratorium on new construction in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank). In response, the Palestinians just increased their demands.  
  
We still pray for a Palestinian leader who wants to have peace and who can deliver it. We are waiting for a Palestinian Anwar Sadat, the brave Egyptian President who made peace with Israel in 1979. Abbas is no Sadat. Instead his move at the U.N. is deliberately intensifying the conflict. He's encouraging the Palestinian people to think they are going to have a state on Day One, which is not going to happen. He knows frustration will turn into violence. Abbas has introduced additional instability to a region that is already on fire, while Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian, is watching from the sidelines, waiting to reap the prize.  
  
PHOTO (COLOR)  
  
By Yossi Beilin; Richard Haass; Daoud Kuttab and Uzi Landau  
  
  
  
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