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Palestinians ask Europe to recognize a state

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The Palestinians have asked European countries to recognize an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip ? a new step in the campaign to pursue statehood outside the framework of a peace deal with Israel.

Peace talks with Israel have been deadlocked since September, leaving Palestinians to start exploring alternative ways forward. The campaign by President Mahmoud Abbas and his West Bank government aims to pressure Israel, though it will likely change nothing on the ground as long as Israel remains opposed.

Palestinian negotiator Nabil Shaath said Thursday he asked France, Britain, Sweden and Denmark and the European Union envoy to the peace process to recognize the truce lines before the 1967 Mideast war as the borders between Israel and a Palestinian state.

Israel captured the Gaza Strip, West Bank and east Jerusalem ? areas where the Palestinians want to establish an independent state ? in 1967, though it withdrew from Gaza in 2005.

Saeb Erekat, another Palestinian negotiator, sent a similar request to EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton this week.

"It's time for the countries around the world who haven't recognized the Palestinian state on the borders of 1967 with east Jerusalem as a capital to do so if they want to preserve the two-state solution," wrote Erekat.

Brazil and Argentina, minor players in the Middle East, recently recognized Palestine as other countries in the Arab world and Africa have done. Several European countries have upgraded

diplomatic relations with the Palestinians. But it is unclear how far the international community will go.

The United States and the European Union have not recognized an independent Palestinian state, saying peace can only be reached through negotiations.

Last week, European Union foreign ministers said they would recognize a Palestinian state "when appropriate," emphasizing the need for a negotiated settlement. They also said they regretted that Israel had not renewed a settlement freeze.

The latest round of peace talks, launched in early September, broke down just three weeks later after a limited Israeli freeze on settlement construction expired.

The Palestinians say they will not resume direct negotiations as long as Israel continues to build homes in Jewish settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, saying the construction is a sign of bad faith. Unable to coax a renewed settlement freeze out of Israel, the U.S. is now shuttling between the sides in indirect talks.

Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor rejected the Palestinian attempts to seek unilateral recognition, saying peace can only be reached through negotiations. "Turning your back on dialogue is turning your back on peace," he said.

Abbas says he prefers a negotiated settlement, but he has been pursuing alternatives with increasing vigor. The Palestinians say they doubt they can reach a peace deal with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who leads a coalition of hardline nationalist and religious parties.

On Thursday, Abbas aide Nabil Abu Rdenneh suggested yet another strategy: Asking the United Nations Security Council to condemn Israeli settlement activity.

He said the decision to approach the Security Council "was made after deep study following the failure of all efforts to get the Israeli government to stop settlement activities."

Palestinian officials had previously talked of seeking U.N. recognition of a state inside the 1967 lines. While they could presumably win a majority in the General Assembly, the bigger prize of recognition by the Security Council, whose decisions are legally binding, would likely face a U.S. veto.

The U.S. routinely vetoes measures Israel considers hostile, and the U.S. House of Representatives on Wednesday passed a resolution "condemning unilateral measures to declare or recognize a Palestinian state."

Some Palestinian officials acknowledge the limits of seeking international recognition. Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad said Wednesday that such moves will not bring a state closer.

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