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Why Israel Should Vote for Palestinian Independence

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This coming week, the Palestinian Authority intends to ask the United Nations to vote for Palestinian statehood during the annual session of the General Assembly. The Palestinian bid represents Israel's greatest political challenge in years. Although the United States has promised to veto the resolution in the Security Council, it is likely that more than 140 countries in the General Assembly will vote in favor and grant the Palestinians the status of non-member state in the UN.

Israel's current leadership considers the resolution a dire threat to the country's strategic interests and has made it a top priority to limit the Palestinians' diplomatic coup. But Israel could achieve its own desperately needed coup by doing what no one expects: voting, under several critical conditions, for Palestinian statehood.

There is no question that the Palestinian state that could be recognized by this vote would be far different from the one that most Israelis envisage. The vast majority of Israelis support a two-state solution and want a Palestinian state to emerge from bilateral negotiations rather than from a unilateral action at the UN. The proposal put before the UN, for example, could claim the 1967 lines as its borders and East Jerusalem as its capital. Such a resolution would render any Israeli presence within these lines inherently illegal and consequently make it harder for Israel to retain control over Jewish holy sites, such as the Western Wall, and the major settlement blocs, which bolster Israeli security and are generally expected to remain a part of Israel in exchange for land swaps. Palestinians will subsequently have trouble compromising on such internationally endorsed positions, and Israelis will find it hard to negotiate under such one-sided terms of reference.

Any Israeli rejection of the resolution could also lead to violence on the ground. Israel could be forced to respond to unrest in a way that deepens its international isolation and paves the way for increasing calls to boycott Israeli goods and companies and for countries to levy sanctions on Israel.

By reaching a compromise with the Palestinian leadership over the UN resolution, Israel can preserve the principle of achieving a two-state solution through direct talks.

Moreover, the showdown at the UN comes amid the historic transition now taking place across the Middle East, leaving Israel's strategic position uncertain. Israelis have watched with concern as the revolution in Egypt has created a power vacuum in the Sinai Peninsula and sparked anti-Israel sentiment in Cairo. The protests against Bashar al-Assad in Syria have made Israel's northern borders unpredictable as well. Relations with Turkey, Israel's traditional ally, continue to deteriorate. And in the midst of the upheaval, Iran continues to develop its nuclear program.

With instability and shifting sands all around them, Israeli leaders have called for caution and patience, especially in terms of advancing the peace process. The Israeli government has therefore launched a massive diplomatic campaign against the UN vote in September, attempting to build, in the words of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a "moral majority" of Western nations opposing the Palestinian effort.

But rather than oppose the resolution, Israel should seize the initiative and use it to its advantage by agreeing to support the Palestinian bid for statehood at the UN. Voting for Palestinian statehood may finally open the door for Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, strengthen the possibility of a two-state solution, and greatly improve Israel's position in the region and in the international community.

The peace process between Israel and the Palestinians has all but disintegrated over the past two years. The cooperative spirit of the Oslo process during the 1990s and the two rounds of serious permanent status negotiations over the last decade gave way to mutual distrust and blame.

This stalemate has proven dangerous to Israel. It has energized radicals on both sides of the conflict, fueled anti-Israel sentiment, harmed Israel's international status, and jeopardized Israel's alliances. But rather than attempt to break the deadlock and rescue Israel from these debilitating circumstances, Israel's current leadership has resisted taking the lead. Last September, for example, Netanyahu refused U.S. President Barack Obama's request that Israel extend its ten-month settlement freeze for an additional 60 to 90 days, harming Israel's

relations with its most important ally and painting the country as an obstacle to peace. Should Israel continue down this road, it may risk having a final settlement imposed on it by the international community.

To reverse course and revive the peace process, Israel should support Palestinian aspirations at the UN -- but only in exchange for several preconditions to be agreed on with the Palestinians, who bear equal responsibility for moving negotiations forward. Israel should announce its support for the UN resolution on the condition that the Palestinians agree to return to the table as soon as possible and without preconditions, fully backed and supported by the international community, and to determine the final settlement through bilateral negotiations. The UN resolution must reflect this aspiration and include Israel's perspective as well. In addition, the two parties must agree to a framework for an interim process that will allow for negotiations based on Israel's recognition of a Palestinian state. This formula will defuse tensions and may prevent wide-scale violence from erupting.

As part of these understandings, Israel should affirm the parameters that former U.S. President Bill Clinton set in 2000 and which President Barack Obama further developed in May 2011: a two-state solution that realizes both the right to self-determination for both Jews and Palestinians, ends all historic claims, and establishes a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders with mutually agreed territorial swaps and security arrangements that meet Israel's vital security needs. This will allow Israel to annex major settlement blocs and Jewish holy places -- areas that most Israelis agree should remain part of their country.

To begin the interim negotiating process, Israel should take several meaningful steps, such as transferring additional security responsibility in the West Bank to the Palestinian Authority, freezing settlement construction on the other side of the security fence, offering compensation to Israeli settlers who wish to move back to Israel proper, and releasing prisoners of Fatah held in Israeli jails. The Palestinians, meanwhile, must agree to continue security cooperation in the West Bank, refrain from launching an international legal campaign against Israel, and avoid a power-sharing arrangement with Hamas. Questions regarding the status of Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees should be determined once both sides have taken these interim steps and begun negotiating borders and security.

This proposal undoubtedly carries risks. For example, Palestinian refusal to implement the conditions for Israeli support of the UN resolution would further damage Israel's strategic position. But the potential benefits of supporting the resolution far outweigh the perils. If Israel manages to garner solid international support by backing the Palestinian UN resolution, it may induce the Palestinians to return to negotiations. This would improve Israel's international status, give it more diplomatic space to maneuver through the chaos in the Middle East, and allow it to shore up its security needs.

Most important, the above proposal may be the only way to preserve the idea of achieving peace through bilateral negotiations. By reaching a compromise with the Palestinian leadership over the UN resolution, Israel can halt the dangerous precedent of unilateral action for conflict resolution and instead preserve the principle of achieving a two-state solution through direct talks, a notion critical to Israel's future. Such a concerted move would prevent a violent confrontation, give the Palestinians the dignity they seek, allow the parties to relaunch negotiations, and win Israel international favor while preserving its security needs. Now is the time not for prudence but for audacity.

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