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Capitol Letter / Obama is stuck between a veto and a hard place

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As President Barack Obama prepares to address the United Nations General Assembly on Wednesday, many recall what he said to the body last year when he devoted over a quarter of his speech to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. One particular phrase drew much attention: "When we come back here next year, we can have an agreement that will lead to a new member of the United Nations - an independent, sovereign state of Palestine, living in peace with Israel."

He was attacked from every possible angle, accused of being naive or of campaigning, instead of governing. And now the president has been warned that vetoing the Palestinian statehood bid at the UN Security Council would be seen as utter cynicism, after he raised the stakes and Palestinian expectations by publicly supporting their quest and referring to a concrete deadline.

Obama wasn't being naive. In last year's speech he spoke at length about the pessimists' predictions, the distrust between Israel and the Palestinians, the rejectionists, the risks, the previous failures. "I hear those voices of skepticism", Obama said. "But I ask you to consider the alternative. If an agreement is not reached, Palestinians will never know the pride and dignity that comes with their own state. Israelis will never know the certainty and security that comes with sovereign and stable neighbors who are committed to coexistence. The hard realities of demography will take hold. More blood will be shed. This Holy Land will remain a symbol of our differences, instead of our common humanity. I refuse to accept that future. And we all have a choice to make.... Words must now be followed by action and I believe that both leaders have the courage to do so".

It seems that both leaders indeed made their choice. President Obama's arrival at the UN this year may be uncomfortable. He risks being seen as placing himself on the wrong side of history, especially in the face of the changing Middle East for which he voiced support. The Palestinian bid that the United States has pledged to veto could be defined as an attempt to realize the very same vision that President Obama presented in his speech last year.

But it is the Palestinian and the Israeli leaders who should really feel uncomfortable. Despite the frantic efforts by the American and the European peace brokers, they chose yet again to talk to the international community instead of to each other and threw themselves into another futile round of the blame game.

"I can't figure out any way anybody comes out ahead on this Palestine vote", Jon Alterman, director of the Middle East Program at Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, told reporters ahead of the General Assembly. "I see it hurting everybody's interest. The Israelis have thrown down the gauntlet and said, 'this is a vital threat to the State of Israel,' raising the stakes on a vote it will surely lose. The United States finds itself in an impossible position, says it will veto the resolution in the Security Council, and will end up once again on the wrong end of a lopsided vote in the General Assembly, surely leading to all sorts of complaints that the administration has no credibility in the international stage," says Alterman.

"The Europeans have a miserable choice ahead of them because on the one hand, they have been vociferously articulating their desire for a Palestinian state. They don't want to be on the wrong side of the United States. They don't want to alienate the Israelis," he says, adding that the bid "does nothing for the Palestinians. It raises expectations in the Palestinian community...and does nothing practical that advances Palestinian interests. It antagonizes the Israelis. It makes them feel more isolated... And it antagonizes Congress which may cut U.S. funding for the Palestinian Authority. I don't see any way anybody does an iota better as a consequence of this, but everybody's in a position where it's very hard to step down."

Twice in the last month U.S. envoys Dennis Ross and David Hale went to the Middle East in the last-ditch efforts to supplant the Palestinian UN route with relaunching direct negotiations. The Quartet met on the same issue on Sunday, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke about it with the European Union representative Catherine Ashton. Certainly, none of them can be blamed for not trying.

It's not about diplomacy

Alterman thinks the problem is not in the realm of diplomacy, but rather politics. "The missing

link is that there is no support on the Israeli side for making far-reaching concessions to the Palestinians because they don't think it will get them peace. There is no support on the Palestinian side for making far-reaching concessions to the Israelis because they don't think it will get them peace. And until you begin to alter those politics, it's very hard to make the diplomacy work."

The pressure, of course, can still work. Even if the PLO leadership remains adamant in their UN quest, the U.S. ambassador to the UN Susan Rice hinted that there is more than one member of the Security Council "skeptical of the timeliness" of the Palestinian bid. In other words, the United States might not even need to veto the resolution if enough members abstain or vote against it.

There might not even be a big drama - beyond the speeches - if the whole Palestinian statehood issue gets tangled in the bureaucracy of the committee that must submit its recommendations to the General Assembly on this matter. It's possible that nothing will change in the short run for the Palestinians, unless the Israeli leadership chooses to overreact.

But what will change for America? These days, President Obama gets open letters from Palestinian students and former officials, some of which urge him to change his position regarding the veto. This month, Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former Saudi ambassador to the US, wrote in an op-ed in New York Times that "the United States would increasingly be seen as toxic by the vast majority of Arabs and Muslims, who demand justice for the Palestinian people," adding that "Saudi Arabia would no longer be able to cooperate with the United States in the same way it historically has."

Charles O. Cecil, former U.S. ambassador to Niger, wrote to Obama that if Washington uses its veto at the UN Security Council, "we will damage our position in the Islamic world - not merely the Arab world - for untold years to come. We will become the object of retribution throughout the Muslim world, and will give new energy to the lagging efforts of Al-Qaida to retaliate against us. I served my country 36 years in the Foreign Service of the United States, 10 assignments in 10 Muslim countries."

But given the fact that Obama is 14 months away from the vote that will either keep him in office or add him to the list of 29 other one-term U.S. presidents, it's highly unlikely that he will suddenly shift his position. Facing slipping Jewish support, rivals that use every possibility to attack him on his "lack of support for Israel," and a growing conservative camp, he probably wouldn't want to hand his critics another quote to be used in elections campaign ads.

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