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Palestine decision reminiscent of another United Nations vote

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Late afternoon on Nov. 29, 1947, I was almost eight years old and our home in Tel Aviv was gripped by intense expectations that something big was going to happen. Our large Beethoven radio was on and my parents were already sitting on the couch as my 16-year-old sister, Ofra, and I joined them on the living room rug. My father explained: "The world is deciding if we will be a state".

I probably did not have any idea of the detailed document of the partition plan that was the subject of the vote about to commence in the UN General Assembly in New York. But I understood that the majority of the world's nations could vote for or against a plan and that, if approved this moment, would amount to recognition of a Jewish state within the boundaries specified by the plan.

Sixty-five years later on Nov. 29, jubilant Palestinians in Ramallah celebrated this momentous act of recognition and legitimation for the prospect of a Palestinian state. Now, even more than in 1947, international public opinion, enormously augmented by modern mass media technology, is probably the most powerful force in the international arena deciding the legitimacy and the duration of wars, the difference between legitimate and pariah states, and the rules of the global order. The UN vote heralded the domestic and international birth of a tangible idea of a Palestinian state and is likely to trigger expected and unexpected developments that could turn the state into a living and breathing reality.

I remember the excitement we felt 65 years ago when the voice of the UN General Assembly's chairman appeared to start the roll call alphabetically. Argentina abstention, Australia "yes" (quiet cheers in the room), Bolivia "yes" ... India "no", Iran "no"...and as the number of "yeses" began to accumulate my father's applause turned increasingly stronger climaxing when he jumped to his feet crying out "bravo" as the United States and the Soviet Union voted in approval. When it became clear that we had a majority, our family and our neighbors were jubilant, rushing to their balconies waving their hands.

Even though eventually the 1947 partition plan, which was intended to lay the ground for a Jewish state beside an Arab state, was invalidated by powerful opposition from Arab states, vocally rejected by the Israeli Zionist Right and then foiled by wars that followed and the policies of leaders, this moment was inscribed in my memory as the end of something very painful and the hopeful beginning of something new.

Six months later when my mother Hanna, a curator at the Tel-Aviv Museum, arranged for me to sneak into the corridor where I could witness our first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, declaring Israel's independence, I witnessed the formal consolidation of the promise of Nov. 29 .

In retrospect, as a political theorist at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem I have come to realize how crucial the moment was when the United Nations majority endorsed the idea of our state even before it was embodied. It was at that moment that would-be Israelis internalized, and the world recognized, the possibility of a state of Israel as an imminent legitimate reality. Then and now, even while a majority vote at the UN General Assembly does not confer legal status on claims of statehood, particularly when it comes to national liberation movements of small suffering nations like us and the Palestinian, such a vote combines powerful political and moral forces that become irresistible in the long run.

Israelis who remember and experienced the event at the General Assembly 65 years ago are especially qualified to appreciate the crucial significance of the vote in the United Nations for the aspirations of the Palestinians to have a state of their own. As in the case of Israel, for the Palestinians the road from international approval to the actual establishment of a sovereign state will be arduous and full of pitfalls.

Nevertheless, there is something unstoppable in the historical dynamic unleashed by the fusion of an endorsement by world public opinion with the determination of a suffering people to achieve freedom and well-being. Such a force tends, in the long run, to transcend the obstacles posed by short-sighted petty politics.

I am more than hopeful that although only symbolic at this stage, the UN vote is an important turning point on the path leading to the realization of a Palestinian state and the pacification of our region.

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