

The End of Oslo

Friday 7 October 2011, by [BUTLER Judith](#) (Date first published: 25 September 2011).

Among the many astonishing claims that Barack Obama made in his recent speech opposing the Palestinian bid for statehood was that 'peace will not come through statements and resolutions.' [1] This is, at best, an odd thing to say for a president whose ascendancy to power itself depended on the compelling use of rhetoric. Indeed, his argument against the power of statements and resolutions at the United Nations to achieve peace was a rhetorical ploy that sought to minimise the power of rhetorical ploys. More important, it was an effort to make sure that the United States government remains the custodian and broker of any peace negotiation, so his speech was effectively a way of trying to reassert that position of custodial power in response to the greatest challenge it has received in decades. And most important, his speech was an effort to counter and drain the rhetorical force of the very public statements that are seeking to expose the sham of the peace negotiations, to break with the Oslo framework, and to internationalise the political process to facilitate Palestinian statehood.

There are reasons to question whether the Palestinian bid for statehood at this time and on these terms is the right thing to do, but they are not the ones that Netanyahu put forward in his blustery and arrogant remarks. Within the Palestinian debates, many have questioned whether the present bid for statehood effectively abandons the right of return for diasporic Palestinians, leaves unaddressed the structural discrimination against Palestinians within the current borders of Israel, potentially abandons Gaza, delegitimises the Palestinian Liberation Organisation by elevating the Palestinian Authority into a state structure, takes off the table the one-state solution, and mistakenly relies on the UN as an arbiter rather than insisting that Palestinian self-determination form the basis of any future state. Critics like Ali Abunimah, the editor of the Electronic Intifada, argue that the UN has proven itself time and again to be a venue for paralysis, given the veto rules that govern the Security Council and secure the hegemony of major powers, making it likely that the present bid for statehood will be defeated by a US veto.

And yet, one effect that is already felt as a consequence of these 'resolutions and statements' is that the 1993 Oslo Accords can no longer be presumed to be the framework for future negotiations - indeed, we may see that framework crumble definitively in the coming days. Oslo not only gave the US a privileged position as broker of all 'peace' negotiations, but effectively sponsored the massive growth of Israeli settlements on Palestinian land by refusing to recognise their illegal status according to international law. In fact, the Oslo years have seen the number of settlers grow from 241,500 in 1992 to 490,000 in 2010 (including East Jerusalem), and the indefinite deferral of all 'permanent status issues' - effectively establishing the occupation as a regime without foreseeable end. The Oslo Accords also implemented the principle that any change of status of Occupied Palestine would depend on the 'consent' of Israel. Thus, the power of Israel to decide the future of Palestine pre-empted the international right of Palestinians to self-determination.

The demise of Oslo as an obligatory framework may well be the most powerful immediate effect of the Palestinian bid for statehood. And yet, a serious debate remains about whether the present bid undermines the broader political right of Palestinian self-determination. Those who oppose the internationalisation of the process underscore that half of all Palestinians may well be disenfranchised if this bid is successful. Can the brokering of statehood through an international body such as the UN confirm the rights of Palestinians to self-determination without external

interference? If the Palestinian Authority becomes synonymous with statehood, does that imply a sacrifice of the right of return for millions of Palestinians outside the region? And does it also abandon Gaza and minority rights within Israel? If the rights of self-determination are a collective right of all Palestinians, Omar Barghouti argues [2], then the UN must preserve the status of the PLO as the rightful representative of the Palestinian people. Perhaps the most devastating criticism has been levelled by Joseph Massad, who understands the present bid for statehood to efface the historic claims of the Palestinian people. On the al-Jazeera website, he writes:

“The question... is not whether the UN should recognise the right of the Palestinian people to a state in accordance with the 1947 UN Partition Plan, which would grant them 45 per cent of historic Palestine, nor of a Palestinian state within the June 5, 1967 borders along the Green Line, which would grant them 22 per cent of historic Palestine. A UN recognition ultimately means the negation of the rights of the majority of the Palestinian people in Israel, in the diaspora, in East Jerusalem, and even in Gaza, and the recognition of the rights of some West Bank Palestinians to a Bantustan on a fraction of West Bank territory amounting to less than 10 per cent of historic Palestine. Israel will be celebrating either outcome.” [3]

Perhaps this explains why more than 60 per cent of Israelis are reported to affirm the present bid for statehood, and why their position is decidedly left of Obama's. But however the struggle turns out between the advocates for a Palestinian political demand that emerges from a movement for inclusive self-determination and those who seek the internationalisation of the process by displacing Oslo with the UN, we are in the middle of a historic shift that will lessen the power of the US, Oslo, and the self-appointed Quartet, which appears set to break up as the UN potentially separates itself from the European Union, the US and Russia. Nothing in Obama's rhetoric will limit these effects. If nothing else, a new set of dynamics will be inaugurated through the statehood bid, and they may prove at the present juncture to be more important, and more valuable, than any of us can foresee at this time. Even if a state does not immediately appear (and there are reasons to hope for an initiative that emerges directly out of a more inclusive Palestinian movement for self-determination), at least we may see an end to a 'peace' process that has become an excuse for Israeli territorial expansion and the permanent deferral of Palestinian aspirations. Something Obama once called 'hope' may well break through the temporal standstill of the occupation, expulsion, confiscation and disenfranchisement.

Judith Butler

P.S.

* London Review of Books, 25 September 2011:

http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2011/09/25/judith-butler/the-end-of-oslo/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=3319&utm_term=.el&utm_term=.1156203&utm_term=.10&utm_term=.f30047a9c1

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/21/remarks-president-obama-address-United-Nations-General-Assembly>

[2] <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/09/2011191394042383843.html>

[3] <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/09/20119158427939481.html>