

# The UN & the Future of Palestine

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“YOU CAN’T MAKE this stuff up,” the Prime Minister of Israel lectured the UN General Assembly. Binyamin Netanyahu was referring to the history of Libya under Qaddafi, and Iraq under Saddam Hussein, chairing UN Commissions on Human Rights and Disarmament respectively.

Something else you can’t make up: A visiting foreign head of government receives a rare invitation to address a joint session of the U.S. Congress, where he proceeds to mock U.S. policy as stated by the President of the United States. In response, virtually the entire Congress explodes in rapturous applause, jumping up and down — members of the president’s party and the opposing one alike, with perhaps fewer than a dozen exceptions — like 525 trained chimpanzees in front of the television cameras.

Has this ever happened before in the U.S. Congress? Has anything like it been seen in the history of any parliamentary system on the face of the planet?

That is what happened when Netanyahu came to Washington on May 24. At that moment, it was clear that president Obama’s frequent appeals for halting Israeli settlements to restart the “peace process” were a dead letter.

Netanyahu returned prior to the September 23 session of the United Nations General Assembly, where Palestinian Authority (PA) and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) chairman Mahmoud Abbas would present the appeal for UN recognition of Palestinian statehood. When asked to respond to Republican candidate Rick Perry’s description of president Obama’s “naïve, arrogant, misguided and dangerous” policy toward Israel, Netanyahu pointedly declined to comment.

## American Humiliation

How then did Obama respond when he rose to address the UN? Here’s how the veteran Israeli peace campaigner and activist Uri Avnery put it, in a commentary worth quoting at some length:

“A WONDERFUL SPEECH. A beautiful speech. The language expressive and elegant. The arguments clear and convincing. The delivery flawless.

“A work of art. The art of hypocrisy. Almost every statement in the passage concerning the Israeli-Palestinian issue was a lie. A blatant lie: the speaker knew it was a lie, and so did the audience.

“It was Obama at his best, Obama at his worst. Being a moral person, he must have felt the urge to vomit. Being a pragmatic person, he knew that he had to do it, if he wanted to be re-elected...Not

very nice, but that's politics, OK?

"It may be superfluous — almost insulting to the reader — to point out the mendacious details of this rhetorical edifice.

"Obama treated the two sides as if they were equal in strength — Israelis and Palestinians, Palestinians and Israelis. But of the two, it is the Israelis — only they — who suffer and have suffered. Persecution. Exile. Holocaust. An Israeli child threatened by rockets. Surrounded by the hatred of Arab children. So sad.

"No Occupation. No settlements. No June 1967 borders. No Naqba. No Palestinian children killed or frightened. It's the straight right-wing Israeli propaganda line, pure and simple — the terminology, the historical narrative, the argumentation.

"The Palestinians, of course, should have a state of their own. Sure, sure. But they must not be pushy. They must not embarrass the United States. They must not come to the UN. They must sit with the Israelis, like reasonable people, and work it out with them. The reasonable sheep must sit down with the reasonable wolf and decide what to have for dinner. Foreigners should not interfere."

In contrast, says Avnery, the Palestinian president Abbas, once ridiculed as a "plucked chicken" by Ariel Sharon, "soared like an eagle" in his UN address.

The ultimate assessment of Abbas is for the Palestinian people to make, of course. Whatever one may think, however, of the many-sided and complex intra-Palestinian debate on the strategic wisdom and effectiveness of the PA/PLO appeal for the UN to formalize a "two-state solution," the result of the opening round at the UN seems unmistakable: a devastating blow to U.S. authority as the Middle East peace broker, and a humiliation for president Obama.

The question of Israel and Palestine in itself is unlikely to be more than a third-rate factor in the 2012 election. Aside from a thin layer of billionaires and neoconservatives, American Jews in large numbers aren't switching their loyalties from the Democrats to the likes of Perry, Michelle Bachman or Mitt Romney. But Obama's dreadful collapse certainly gives the right wing in both the United States and Israel the opportunity to gloat over his weakness, even while they continue to attack him for insufficient support for Israel.

Beyond domestic politics, however, U.S. imperialism pays a price for the Obama administration's abject inability and unwillingness to discipline Israel's rogue-regime behavior. U.S. authority and prestige is in steep decline in the context of the popular upheavals rocking the Arab world.

American support for Israeli occupation brutalities while blathering about human rights and democracy is old news. But when it becomes clear that Washington can't control its Israeli junior partner even when it appears to be in its own interests to do so, why would other players in the regional drama obey to its dictates?

U.S. diplomacy in the face of the "Arab Spring" is a tricky double game of simultaneously maintaining relations both with hated despotic regimes and with friendly sectors of opposition movements. Having Netanyahu run wild with impunity hardly enhances the American reputation for firmness and determination, let alone decent values.

The Republican-controlled House of Representatives may carry through on its threat to vote a cutoff of U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority. The Obama administration would surely oppose this, as it would undercut U.S. leverage over the PA — which is, of course, the reason for giving the aid in the first place. Luckily for Obama in this instance, the Israeli government for its own reason probably

wants to squeeze, but avoid an outright financial collapse of the PA and the social explosion that might follow.

## **2, 3, Many “Two-State Solutions”**

The weakening of U.S. prestige and authority will be significant as events unfold in the broader Middle East. More narrowly, what are the prospects for advancing toward Palestinian independence and a “two-state solution” for Israel-Palestine through the UN process? The answer, in my view, is “distant at best.”

As everyone pretty much knows, the immediate next round is the U.S. attempt to round up enough Security Council votes against the Palestinian “full UN membership” petition — under the transparent pretext of “direct negotiations” — so that it doesn’t become necessary to cast a veto, which would be a further humiliation for U.S. policy.

Whichever way the petition is defeated at the Security Council, the question of “non-member state” status for Palestine (upgrading its “permanent observer” role) can then go to the General Assembly, where there’s no great-power veto. This represents symbolic progress, although it wouldn’t change the realities of Israeli occupation, annexation and apartheid on the ground.

Real change in any positive direction can come about only through a combination of effective mass Palestinian resistance, allied with the democratic upheaval in the Arab world; political isolation of Israel by the growth of international popular BDS (boycott/divestment/sanctions) campaigns; and actions by governments in Israel’s European trading partners to impose economic sanctions on Israel for its blocking of Palestinian exports and destruction of the Palestinian economy. In the present disastrous state of the European Union and eurozone, positive action from that source seems utopian.

The responsibility of the solidarity movement, it seems to me, is not to get caught up in wonkish or wishful “one-versus-two-state” disputations, but to do everything we can to advance the bottom-up struggle where we are. This is all the more important because, while gains can be won now to get the occupation’s foot a little bit off the Palestinians’ neck, no lasting solution seems possible in isolation from a broader democratic revolutionary transformation of the region.

Given that “the two-state solution” dominates official discourse and punditry, however, it’s necessary to briefly clarify that this formula has multiple meanings, so widely divergent that we have to say there are “two, three, many two-state solutions.”

The Israeli government line is clear enough: A Palestinian state will consist of whatever fragments Israel chooses to relinquish, subject to Israeli control of its borders. Not only that, but going beyond the normal establishment of state-to-state relations, the Palestinians are subject to the condition that they must “recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people.”

This formula not only explicitly demands renouncing the Palestinian Right of Return, but it may be suspected of implying the right of the “Jewish and democratic state” to unilaterally “transfer” the citizenship rights of its 20% Arab population to the Palestinian state, in South African Bantustan style. The United States has been alarmingly silent on this possibility.

There’s a second, more liberal Zionist view that a Palestinian state should be genuinely independent and viable, based on “1967 borders” adjusted by equitable land swaps and large-scale dismantling of settlements, and (in some but certainly not all liberal Zionists’ view) recognition of the Right of

Return at least as a principle, with appropriate compensation where its implementation may not be practical.

The payoff envisioned for this generosity is that Israel can finally separate itself from Palestine, i.e. that a progressive Jewish State can live by itself in clear conscience, “we here and they over there,” i.e. the Arabs over the horizon and hopefully as distant as possibly culturally, politically and socially. The Palestinian state needs to be viable precisely so that separation will work.

The third two-state vision is upheld by activists like Uri Avnery and his colleagues in Gush Shalom: two states negotiated to live not in isolation, but in cooperation and solidarity. This is the antithesis of the Zionist desire for maximum separation; in fact, its goal is mutual recognition between the two peoples now living in historic Palestine, not just a cold peace between states.

This two-state program includes, crucially, the struggle to make Israel a truly democratic state of its citizens, including recognition of an Israeli nationality — something that the State of Israel has never accepted, because it would essentially negate the Zionist “state for the Jews” project. If achieved it would amount to a political revolution, superseding the Jewish-supremacist ethnarchy of the state’s origins.

It is certainly this kind of vision — however we may assess the practical likelihood of its realization within a two-state or some other configuration — with which we should solidarize.

## **Israel’s Internal Struggle**

The other major development of recent months has been the emergence of the social movement massed in the streets of Israeli cities, protesting the grotesque inequalities that make daily life increasingly impossible for ordinary people.

The most hopeful possibility coming from within the Israeli state in many years, this movement should be viewed in the context of the international protests against the ravages of neoliberalism — very much like the indignados movements in Greece and Spain, or the “Occupy Wall Street” struggle spreading to other U.S. cities.

Potentially, this upsurge could be the signal of the birth of an independent working class movement in Israel. It’s wrong in my view to regard it fundamentally as an effort to preserve Jewish privilege — although that’s an issue it will certainly have to confront if it is to survive and grow, and its emergence doesn’t immediately change the Israeli-Palestinian balance of forces or threaten to bring down Netanyahu.

In fact, the Israeli social movement’s weakness is also its strength: the absence of an organized political expression. That means it doesn’t have leverage at the parliamentary or legislative level. At the same time, thanks to the fortunate collapse of the Labor Party and the Zionist fake-left (Meretz), there isn’t a bureaucratic political party apparatus to coopt, swallow and direct it into the usual Jewish-supremacist channels.

The backdrop is Israel’s neoliberal transformation of the past 20-25 years, producing big economic growth but also a severe increase in inequality, and deepening poverty among both Arab and Jewish Israeli citizens as well. The reality of serious Jewish poverty in Israel, especially among those outside the Ashkenazi elites, creates the basis for joint struggle. The barriers to such a development within a Jewish-supremacist state are huge, but are they qualitatively greater than — for example — the barriers to class politics in the United States created by racism?

These issues require extended discussion in their own right, but the tectonic shifts in the entire region will outlast the sordid performances of Netanyahu and Obama.

**David Finkel**

POSTSCRIPT: Just as the U.S. campaign to swing votes at the UN Security Council against Palestinian statehood went into high gear, the Israeli government announced another 1100 housing units for Jewish-only settlements in occupied East Jerusalem. Hillary Clinton pronounced the timing “unhelpful.” Can you hear the sound of Netanyahu laughing?

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**P.S.**

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<http://www.solidarity-us.org/current/node/3429>