

Sep 7 2011

Achieving Palestinian Statehood in September

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By Guy Burton

This month the question of whether a Palestinian state is recognised by the international community will be put [before the UN](#). Despite the fact that there has been plenty of time to prepare and anticipate for this moment, it still seems uncertain how this is to be achieved in practice. There are three options currently available and all appear outside the control of the Palestinians themselves.

The international route

The preferred option is to pursue diplomatic recognition from the UN Security Council (UNSC) whose decisions are binding. However, the [Palestinians are anticipating an American veto](#). As an alternative, the Palestinian leadership believes it can get sufficient votes in the UN General Assembly to achieve a more limited non-Member State status, enabling it to claim a moral victory of sorts. However, there is a risk that any Member State might appeal the issue and request that the matter be deferred for discussion to a later date. In other words, the question of Palestinian statehood could be kicked into touch for yet another couple of years.

The domestic route

Beyond the UN path, the Palestinian Authority (PA) Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, has been engaged in a process of state-building. This was set out in the Ending the Occupation, Establishing the State programme in August 2009, also known as the "Fayyad Plan". At its core the programme aims to build and reform the PA's administrative, fiscal and judicial institutions while both building up and streamlining the security forces. The [donor community](#) supports the plan because it both echoes its own agenda as set out in the [donor conference in December 2007](#) and offers a counterweight to the Hamas administration in the Gaza strip, that is, by showering the PA in the West Bank with money and showing what Palestinians can expect if they would only turn away from the Islamists.

In April [the World Bank reported](#) to the donor community's Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (ALHC) that the PA had effectively met the criteria for statehood. Yet this will not advance Palestinian self-determination any further. Notwithstanding the conceptual problem associated with this statement – that statehood is earned rather than a national right – donors have tended to support the Oslo process, which is tacit acceptance of the status quo.

However, even if donors do not reject Oslo, Palestinian preparedness for statehood may increase Israel's pariah status, especially if it continues its occupation and settlement building in the West Bank. Yet neither moral suasion nor international law will be sufficient to get Israel to concede to the Palestinians sovereignty in the West Bank or Gaza. While Palestinians have a tendency to cite legal norms against the occupation, it has not prevented the current situation lasting for 44 years. In such circumstances, why should this now change.

The Israeli route: international or domestic pressure

At present there are two ways Israel might be pressed into leaving the occupied territory, regardless of a UN vote. Either there is demand from below, in Israeli civil society for a change of policy, or Israel faces pressure from its international sponsors to withdraw.

Pressure from without

[Obama's retreat](#) from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the past year means that there is little significant pressure on the Israeli government. The prospect of an American veto against Palestinian statehood if it comes before the UNSC only shows how comprehensively the Americans appear to have given up.

Obama's weakness demonstrates the strength of the American pro-Israel lobby, as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt have documented in their book, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*. In addition to substantial resources, the lobby has successfully cultivated links with key legislators and administration officials to promote Israeli concerns, sometimes to the



Source: *Yale Journal of International Affairs*

detriment of the US itself. The pro-Israel lobby's current strength can only be countered by a counter lobbying. However, the capacity to achieve this in the short term would be difficult.

Pressure from within

There were few signs of domestic pressure on the Israeli government before the summer. The current Netanyahu government has been especially obstinate, which reflects its coalition with several rightwing parties, including those close to settlers who have no desire to give up the West Bank.

Meanwhile the [Israeli Left](#), which tended to be most closely associated with the peace camp, has largely become a shell of its former self. This reflects an impression that Israeli society has become increasingly disconnected from the occupation. Here the separation wall, which was begun under the Ariel Sharon government (2001-06) to divide Israel from the Palestinians, constitutes something much more than a metaphor. Rather it is literal evidence of an Israeli desire for complete separation from the Palestinian 'problem' by putting the population behind the wall and carrying out occasional incursions to discourage infiltration.

The [Israeli disconnect from the occupation](#) has also been notable in the wave of protests against the government. These began in early July as a reaction against the rising cost of living, initially with regard to cottage cheese prices and then against high rents. Young demonstrators began living in tents alongside some of the most affluent streets in Tel Aviv, steadily gaining support to the point that around 300,000 (out of a population of seven million) marched in protest across the country at the beginning of August. The size of the protests has caught the government by surprise, forcing it to backtrack and begin a [process of review](#).

However, the protestors have largely avoided discussion about the occupation. While disappointing many activists concerned with social justice, there are strategic reasons for this. First, the protestors do not have a common position on Israel's occupation and treatment of Palestinians. Second, some protestors fear that discussion of the occupation may encourage the government in its efforts to delegitimize their demands, by claiming that they are [undermining Israel's security](#).

In sum then, that Israel's largest and most significant social movement is either unable or unwilling to address the occupation, highlights the virtual absence of domestic pressure on the government. However, it is notable that some [settler groups have sought space](#) within the protest movement to counter the general view that they have been the chief beneficiaries of government policies in recent years. At the same time, there may be self-interest at work; according to Eyal Clyne, an Israeli researcher, between 2004 and 2009 half of the settlements constructed in the West Bank depended on government funds, compared to 21% in Israel and the occupied territory as a whole and 3% in Tel Aviv. In addition, the government [subsidises settlers over other Israelis](#), spending 40,000 shekels per capita on the average Israeli and 93,000 shekels per capita on a settler each year.

Looking beyond September

Palestinians have sought to circumvent the deadlock presented by Israel's unwillingness to abide by the Oslo process. Evidence of this intransigence spills off every page of the Palestine Papers which the [Al Jazeera network exposed](#) at the start of the year. As the stronger party, Israel has had the capacity to shape the process but refused to accede to even the smallest Palestinian request. The result is that many Palestinians now see Oslo as dead.

At the same time, the Palestine Papers showed American failure to act as an honest broker. That, coupled with the absence of any significant pressure for change within Israeli society (the tent protest notwithstanding) means that Israel unlikely to moved by a decision in favour of a Palestinian state at the UN.

Furthermore, even if Palestinian statehood is accepted it will only be a partial victory – especially with the existent potential for referral. Assuming that the Palestinians are successful, what then? Palestinian statehood is unlikely to be met with any significant change on the ground.

Would Israel's rejection of an end to the occupation and an independent Palestine lead to a Third Intifada? That assumption rests on the idea that because the Palestinians have sought statehood through the non-violent Oslo and UN processes, their continual frustration will result in the use of force. But would this really be the case? The Palestinians have already tried this path once before, during the [Second Intifada after September 2000](#) [the First Intifada between (1987 -1991) incorporated the use of non-violent labour and consumer boycotts]. The Second Intifada became an armed – and largely disproportionate – confrontation between a powerful Israel and several weaker Palestinian militias. Not only was the outcome beyond doubt, it also gave Israel license to proceed with some of its more discriminatory practices, including the construction of the separation wall.

Given the disparity in power, it is not in the Palestinians' interest to pursue violent means. Although sporadic and individual acts may well occur, the general trend is in favour of other, non-violent means of resistance, such as the [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions \(BDS\) movement](#) and ongoing sites of protests in places like Bil'in, Nil'in and Nabi Saleh. Refugees' descendents may well continue the actions they [initiated in May](#), when many not only congregated at the Lebanese and Syrian borders, but passed through them even while facing Israeli army bullets. The expectation is that these movements and actions may eventually wear down both Israel's capacity, and willingness, to act. Eventually, it may even prompt Israeli society towards inward reflection and whether continuing the occupation is worth the cost.

That such a scenario offers the Palestinians the best hope of achieving Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank and its siege of Gaza may seem bleak; it will require both endurance and courage. But what may help is the seal of international recognition in the form of that UN vote this month– even if the world fails to place itself in the firing line to ensure that Palestine's

independence is realised in practice.

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