



What If the Palestinians Declare Independence?

RECENTLY WE HAVE SEEN THE FLOATING OF AN old-new idea by senior people in Mahmud Abbas's Palestinian Authority (PA): a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI), to encompass all of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, accompanied by a demarche to the U.N. Security Council asking for a resolution officially recognizing the new state.

Supporters of the idea believe that the declaration and international endorsement would immeasurably clarify the legal situation on the ground: In such a scenario, Israel would simply be an illegitimate occupier of a sovereign state's territory, giving the Palestinians iron-clad legitimacy as they negotiate with Israel on the key issues of security, territorial adjustments, water, Jerusalem and refugees.

Skeptics of the plan, however, fear that the declaration would be destabilizing: It could lead to assertive Israeli counter-measures, including the official annexation of portions of the West Bank and preventing the Palestinians from any attempt to exercise sovereignty outside of the 3 percent of the West Bank that constitutes Area 'A' under the Oslo II interim agreement. Indeed, this likelihood, and the resulting spiral of renewed violence, is guiding the Western response, especially of the EU, to the idea, much to the disappointment of Palestinian advocates of such a declaration.

Palestinian consideration of a UDI is an indication of deep Palestinian frustration with the Obama administration, the absence of any political track, and Israel's relentless building expansion in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. It must also be viewed in the context of internal Palestinian divisions not seen since Yasser Arafat took over the PLO in 1969.

Abbas is currently holding an extremely weak hand: The PA was forcibly expelled from Gaza by Hamas, his own Fatah movement failed to make the transition from the leading revolutionary movement to a ruling political party and years of negotiation with Israel and the U.S. have failed to produce any tangible achievements. In this light, the UDI option is a direct continuation of Abbas's recent public declaration that he was considering not running for reelection for the PA presidency. (Elections were scheduled to be held in January 2010, but have now been postponed indefinitely, owing to Hamas's unwillingness to submit to the PA in Gaza.)

Indeed, Arab commentators were in broad agreement that Abbas's maneuverings were just that and that he had no intention to leave politics and dismantle the PA structures, thus compelling a re-imposition of direct Israeli military rule. Moreover, Fatah and the PA hardly desire a succession struggle at this time, strengthening the likelihood that Abbas will be persuaded to remain in power.

The notion of a Palestinian unilateral declaration of indepen-

dence is hardly a new one. In fact, it was Yasser Arafat's threat to issue one in September 2000, following the formal expiration of the Oslo Accords' five-year interim period, which prompted then-prime minister Ehud Barak and U.S. president Bill Clinton to convene the Camp David II summit, in what was a panicky, failed effort to achieve a final settlement and paved the way for the outbreak of the second intifada. More recently, the idea was included in Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's proposal, floated during the summer months, which suggested focusing on institution-building over the next two years, at the end of which time the basis for a viable and functioning Palestinian state would hopefully exist.

At that point, an effective UDI could be issued, in the event that Israel was not willing to reach an agreement with the Palestinian leadership. Without such preparation, by contrast, a UDI, even if it doesn't prompt Israeli counter-measures, runs the risk of being

merely hot air, a warmed-over version of the 1988 PLO Declaration of Independence, creating a phantom entity, which controls only a smidgen of its own territory and a fraction of its population.

Fayyad's focus on institution-building has, in fact, made some progress, with the help of the Palestinians' Western patrons. The town of Jenin has been transformed from a place run by gangs and militant groups (often the same thing) to a secure enclave open for business. Hebron is heading in the same direction. Palestinian accounting under Fayyad has become more transparent, giving further impetus to Western donors. Plans for the first new

Palestinian city north of Ramallah, designed for a dynamic, entrepreneurial educated middle class, are moving ahead.

Given the difficulties, which have confronted America's George Mitchell since assuming the post of peace process czar, it is unlikely that another UDI threat will produce a response similar to the panicky one in 2000. However, worried Israeli policy-makers should hardly breathe easy, for the situation remains extremely fragile. Jerusalem, especially, is a flash point, providing ample opportunities for an explosion. It appears that most of the Israeli elite, both civilian and military, is aware of this situation, not to mention the Obama administration's insistence that Israel not do anything in Jerusalem that would adversely affect the Palestinians.

Proper management of this bedeviling, long-running conflict, i.e., making incremental progress, neutralizing threats, and maintaining a long-term vision for an equitable settlement, will require enormous skill and leadership on all sides.

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