

## U.S. policy undermines moderate Palestinians

Stephen Zunes | Oct. 28, 2011



A Palestinian man walks by a banner promoting the Palestinian bid for statehood in the West Bank town of Bethlehem Sept. 18. (CNS/Debbie Hill)

### *Viewpoint*

The Palestinians declared an independent state back in 1988, which has been recognized by more than 130 of the world's nations. The Obama administration, however, insists that it is still too early for Palestine to be admitted into the United Nations.

Though the U.N. has been the arena in which international conflicts -- including those between Israel and its neighbors -- have historically been addressed, the Obama administration insists that this should no longer be the case. Instead, they argue, Palestinian statehood can only be recognized following an agreement resulting from negotiations between the Israeli occupiers and the Palestinians under occupation, facilitated by the United States, the primary military, economic and diplomatic supporter of the occupying power.

Unfortunately, while the leadership of the Palestinian Authority under President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad is the most moderate leadership the Palestinians have had, the current Israeli government is the most hard-line in that country's history.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu insists that Arab East Jerusalem -- the largest Palestinian city and historic heart of Palestinian cultural, economic, religious and academic life -- should be permanently annexed into Israel, as should the Jordan Valley, on the eastern border of Palestine. Furthermore, his government has declared that large swaths of territory in between should also be annexed into Israel to incorporate its illegal settlements.

The result would be that the only land left for the Palestinians to have their 'state' would be a series of tiny noncontiguous cantons surrounded by Israel.

Despite two and a half years of pressure from the Obama administration, Netanyahu has not budged on his position at all. Still, President Obama insists that Palestinian statehood must not be recognized except under conditions agreed to by the current rightist Israeli government.

Back in 1948, the United States did not demand that the Jews in the British Mandate of Palestine refrain from going to the U.N. or that they reach a negotiated agreement with the Palestinians on their boundaries and related issues in order to have their state recognized. Israel achieved its independence through a U.S.-backed U.N. General Assembly resolution and was accepted, with U.S. support, as a member state the following year. Indeed, the United States was the very first country to recognize Israel.

More recently, the United States recognized Kosovo's unilaterally declared independence and has supported its application for U.N. membership without demanding a negotiated agreement with the Serbs, despite Kosovo legally being part of Serbia.

U.N. Security Council Resolution 242 -- long seen as the basis of Israeli-Palestinian peace -- calls for security guarantees from Israel's neighbors as a prerequisite for Israel's withdrawal from occupied Arab territories. However, the Palestinian Authority, under the leadership of Abbas and Fayyad, has already agreed to such security guarantees as part of a final agreement, including demilitarization of their new state, the disarming of militias and opening their country to Israeli and international monitors. Meanwhile, there have been virtually no attacks against civilians inside Israel from areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority since Abbas became president in 2005.

Furthermore, Resolution 242 reiterates the long-standing international principle recognizing the illegitimacy of any country expanding its territory by military force. A series of subsequently adopted resolutions have called on Israel to rescind its illegal annexation of greater East Jerusalem and to withdraw from its illegal settlements in East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank. As territories under foreign belligerent occupation, the Palestinians living on these lands have a legal right to self-determination under international law.

The Palestinian Authority has also made clear in its application for U.N. membership that it is not demanding any Israeli territory inside the pre-1967 borders. The state Palestinians wish to be recognized, therefore, would constitute only 22 percent of historic Palestine. Unfortunately, the Obama administration apparently believes this is too much. The U.S. veto of this historic diplomatic initiative in which the elected Palestinian leadership is permanently renouncing its claims to 78 percent of Palestinians' historic homeland will only embolden Hamas and other Palestinian extremists who can now argue that compromise and diplomacy does not work and that armed struggle for all of Palestine is the only means for achieving statehood.

Obama still claims he supports a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel and has eloquently expressed his support for the legitimate aspirations of both sides. Unfortunately, like the "white moderates" described in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter From Birmingham Jail" who similarly professed to support the goals but not the methods, Obama insists on negotiations with oppressors who refuse to compromise and "believes he can set the timetable for someone else's freedom."

Obama's anti-Palestinian position will severely damage the standing of the United States in the Arab world just when we can least afford to alienate the new generation of pro-democracy activists nonviolently trying to reshape the region.

It is unlikely that Obama will gain much domestically from his hard-line stance either, given that most people who support the Israeli occupation will presumably vote Republican anyway. Indeed, Republicans will call him "anti-Israel" despite the veto just as they call him "socialist" no matter how much he kowtows to Wall Street. Instead, he has simply eroded further the support of his liberal base that believes Palestinians, no more or less than Israelis, have the right to national self-determination.

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