



The 2015 UN General Assembly and the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process: Commentary & Analysis

October 2015

The stagnation in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was clearly reflected at the 2015 UN General Assembly. The speeches of Mahmoud Abbas and Benjamin Netanyahu lacked vision and hope, and Barack Obama's speech ignored the Israeli-Palestinian issue altogether. The results of the Quartet meeting, held on the margins of the General Assembly, were far from a breakthrough. This document includes commentary and analysis on these issues by Mitvim experts: Dr. Ilai Saltzman, Colette Avital, Dr. Nimrod Goren, Dr. Ido Zelkowitz, and Rebecca Bornstein.

Netanyahu's Speech: Nothing New Under the Sun

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech at the UN General Assembly is truly emblematic of his policies for the past six years. In fact, it is also characteristic of his policies during his first premiership during the mid-1990s. He is virtuous in saying nothing new to the extent that one can play his previous speeches in a loop until his past and present speeches become indistinguishable.

This is not to say that all of the things that he said are false, but to suggest that he gave up on any hope of presenting a fresh and promising vision for the future of the State of Israel. His words were designed to reach his domestic constituency and not world leaders. When he criticized the international community he did not try to entice cooperation but to show his actual and potential voters that he is not afraid to face the gentiles in what many in Israel believe to be one of the most anti-Israeli forums today.

Netanyahu rightly focused on the fluid nature of the Middle East at present but offered no original ideas to harness these events to improve Israel's standing. Netanyahu devoted nearly half of his speech to Iran's nuclear program as if there was no agreement signed between Tehran and the major western powers with the support of China and Russia. It was old news for the audience in the assembly and they merely waited to see what Netanyahu's new gimmick was after his September 2012 use of a Looney Tunes bomb. With regards to the Palestinian issue, Netanyahu restated his commitment to the two-state solution and offered to start direct negotiations with Abu Mazen immediately. However, how can these hollow statements be reconciled with his government's policies?

He downplayed the detrimental effects his personal behavior and policies had on Israeli-American relations and completely ignored the long-term implications of the erosion in the special relationship between Washington and Jerusalem. One needs only to consider Obama's repeated refusal to announce that he would veto any Palestinian bid for statehood in the Security Council at the request of Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid who sought to garner support for the Iran deal.

There was nothing new in Netanyahu's speech and, sadly, there seems to be nothing new about Netanyahu himself. Playing for time, trying to manage the Israeli-Palestinian conflict rather than strive to solve it, and avoiding any meaningful regional initiative. The same bag of trick, the same old wine in an old bottle. Nothing more and nothing less, just more of the same.

Netanyahu's Speech: The Prophet of the Apocalypse

Colette Avital

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The annual meeting of the UN General Assembly affords heads of state the opportunity to lay out their vision and policies for the future of the world. This, however, was not the case with the Prime Minister of Israel, who addressed a half-empty General Assembly hall.

The majority of Netanyahu's monologue was devoted to listing the sins of Iran, as well as the dangers the Islamic Republic poses to the world. Netanyahu seized the opportunity to attack and castigate the entire world, and particularly the UN that was hosting him, for its silence, as if the entire world is against us again.

In the past, Netanyahu has been able to captivate the world's attention and focus it on the Iranian nuclear issue. However, now that the deal with Iran has been signed, the issue is one for the history books. No one is interested anymore. The manner in which Netanyahu conducted himself vis-à-vis President Obama and his Administration precluded Israel from having any impact upon the nuclear agreement. Even if I were inclined to believe his apocalyptic prophecies, his

empty slogans and talking points, which have been uttered so many times before, prevented me from doing so.

Just one day after Abu Mazen's speech, Israeli-Palestinian peace was but a secondary feature in Netanyahu's remarks. On this issue, too, he said nothing new, pointing an accusatory finger at Abu Mazen. The prime minister reiterated his commitment to a two-state solution. However, the goal behind doing this was probably to restart a positive bilateral dialogue with the Obama Administration. Other than an unconvincing call to resume negotiations "without preconditions", Netanyahu did not present any new plan or vision. One must also ask: is the call to recognize Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people not a precondition?

In light of the deteriorating situation in Jerusalem and the Palestinian Territories, one would have expected a speech whose goal was to calm the situation and create hope. Unfortunately, this section of Netanyahu's speech was hollow and disappointing. What is more, one must wonder why Netanyahu chose to ignore the harsh reality across the region – the bloody conflict taking place on Israel's northern border, as well as the Russian presence in Syria and the risks it carries.

Netanyahu's speech was another eloquent, missed opportunity for it said nothing about the Israeli policy. This, of course, should come as no surprise: an Israeli foreign policy simply does not exist. And beyond that, it is hard to comprehend why Netanyahu chooses to confront the entire world time and again. What precisely did he think we stand to gain from that?

[Read Colette Avital's full commentary here.](#)

The Quartet Meeting: The International Community Attempts a Comeback

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The meeting of the Middle East Quartet, on the margins of the UN General Assembly, was part of an attempt to breathe new life into this dormant multinational mechanism that was set up in 2002.

In recent months, the Quartet has begun to show signs of coming to life. Its representatives – from the US, the EU, Russia and the UN – held a series of meetings in Cairo, Amman, and Riyadh. The main goal of these meetings was to discuss measures that will preserve the viability of a two-state solution. But they also aimed at increasing Arab involvement in efforts to promote the peace process, with an emphasis on the Arab Peace Initiative.

The most recent Quartet meeting in New York, was supposed to be the highpoint of these efforts and senior representatives from Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and

the Arab League were also invited to attend. And yet, the results of the meeting were far from a breakthrough. The Quartet acknowledged its need to consult with regional actors and to hear additional voices in the international community. It also called for both Israel and the Palestinians to implement previously signed agreements and to take concrete steps on the ground. A diplomatic delegation of the Quartet will be dispatched to both Jerusalem and Ramallah in mid-October, to try and spark some momentum following the meeting.

The Quartet's efforts do not occur in a vacuum. In the past year, the international community has debated possible next steps to promote Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution. With the US still reassessing its policy following the failure of the negotiations led by John Kerry, it has been mainly France that has tried to launch new initiatives, chiefly among them an attempt to introduce a UN Security Council resolution outlining parameters for a two-state solution.

These initiatives, however, were postponed again and again. Instead, the international community recently began to contemplate the possibility of creating an International Support Group for the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process. At its core, this initiative is an attempt to add a number of European and Arab countries to the Quartet. The impetus for this initiative was influenced by the success of the model of negotiations conducted by the P5+1 with Iran, which proved that an international coalition has the capacity to reach diplomatic achievements.

The recent Quartet meeting made it evident that the Quartet members prefer to preserve its current standing and composition. However, if the Quartet wishes to create new momentum in the peace process, it must also show a willingness to reinvigorate itself and to accept additional countries as members (and not merely taking advice from them). The creation of an International Support Group will not likely bring peace, but it may assist the international community in executing new coordinated initiatives whose implementation has failed over the past year.

[Read Nimrod Goren's full commentary here.](#)

Abu Mazen's Speech: In Search of International Pressure on Israel

Dr. Ido Zelkowitz
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The message of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's (Abu Mazen) speech was important, even if the delivery was quite soporific. When one casts aside the political posturing and rhetoric, the important core of Abbas's message remains.

Abu Mazen has not given up on the principle of a two-state solution, despite the persistent decline in Palestinian public belief in its feasibility. However, he does not view the Israeli government as an honest and true partner in peace. In Abu

Mazen's view, the way to reach an agreement with Israel is for the international community to apply significant pressure on Jerusalem to resolve the conflict.

However, herein lies the mistake in Abu Mazen's strategy for the international community is preoccupied with a number of other geopolitical problems, such as the expansion of the Islamic State and its ramifications on Europe. It is for this reason that Abu Mazen alluded to his willingness to create chaos by announcing that the Palestinian Authority is no longer bound by the Oslo Accords. Such a step can lead to immediate unrest on the ground and to other measures being taken by the Palestinians who will attempt to create facts on the ground while taking advantage of the weapon of the weak – the camera.

Despite this announcement, Abu Mazen continues to call for the resumption of negotiations while outlining a number of legitimate conditions, which Israel can partially accept, such as the freezing of construction in the settlements. At this point of time, Netanyahu and Abu Mazen should at least take responsible next steps that would prevent an increase in Israeli-Palestinian violence.

From an internal Palestinian perspective, it would be wise to focus on a specific passage from Abu Mazen's remarks that is quite thought provoking: "I further recall General Assembly resolution 67/19 of 2012, which accorded to Palestine observer state status, reaffirmed that the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization would be the interim government of the state of Palestine and that the Palestinian National Council is the Palestinian parliament of the state of Palestine."

According to my understanding, the meaning of this passage is that the Palestinian president will continue to put his full weight behind the appointment of a PLO Executive Committee that will follow his instructions. At the moment, it seems as though he is not eager to depart the stage. President Abbas needs to stabilize his hold over the PLO and Fatah institutions in order to have a more supportive environment to execute his policy.

The speech at the UN will give Abu Mazen a few weeks of quiet and a slight increase in public support. Subsequently, however, the Palestinian people will judge him based only upon his actions and accomplishments on the ground.

Obama's speech: Signaling a Multilateral Approach

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President Obama's speech at the UN General Assembly focused on multilateralism and global progress. It did not mention the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict. This marked a break from past high-level speeches and prompted speculation as to the future role of the US in Middle East peace.

While the speech did not focus directly on the stalled peace process, it did underscore the norms that drive US policy and diplomacy in the region. Obama's focus on multilateralism, in particular, will shape the next phase of the peace process, especially as it seems clear that the administration will not unveil a large-scale initiative for the coming year.

For years Israeli and Palestinian leaders relied on high-level attention in the form of US-led peace initiatives. Leaders on both sides prioritized internal affairs and postponed crucial steps towards peace, and the process became an end unto itself. The fact that neither Obama, Abbas, or Netanyahu's speeches at the General Assembly provided new content or progress reflects the fact that the existing framework is crumbling.

One can look to Obama's speech to find the principles that will guide future US policy. In regard to Syria and other regional conflicts, Obama affirmed that the US "cannot by itself impose stability on a foreign land," and that success will come only as the result of cooperation under the mantle of international law. This can also be applied to the peace process. If the existing framework for a two-state solution is to be salvaged, Israeli and Palestinian leaders must shift from awaiting the next US-led initiative to thinking about regional and multilateral action.

There are opportunities for progress on this front: the Quartet is poised to pick up a larger role in negotiations; the proposed framework laid out in the Arab Peace Initiative remains a potential starting point for serious talks towards peace and regional integration; and the international community has discussed the creation of an International Support Group designed to provide a stronger multilateral forum for negotiations.

It is clear from other speeches and policy papers that the US will remain involved in the peace process, but that it will not be the administration's sole focus over the coming months. While multilateral action is possible, progress will ultimately rest in the hands of Netanyahu and Abbas.