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The Problem Israel Faces at the UN

The Beginning: Castro and Qaddafi Take Control of the UNGA Agenda

For close to forty years, the UN has served as the center of a worldwide effort to delegitimize Israel. It started when Fidel Castro and Muammar Qaddafi, after competing for the leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement, decided in the early 1970's to join in an effort to take control of the agenda of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Castro brought to this effort the member states of the Soviet bloc at the UN. Qaddafi brought the Organization of the Islamic Conference (now known as the Organization for Islamic Cooperation).

Given the limited authority of the UNGA, which lacks the power of making decisions that are binding on the member states of the UN, Castro and Qaddafi or their advisers developed a new function for the UNGA: to engage in propaganda campaigns against the United States (Castro's concern) and Israel (Qaddafi's concern). The effort against Israel, from the very beginning, was to delegitimize the State, an effort that was started by equating Israel with apartheid South Africa. The effort directed against the United States was to embarrass it by getting resolutions on economic development adopted that pitted the developing countries against the developed world. These resolutions had no practical results, but by getting them adopted by outvoting the West they did serve a propaganda purpose.

To be sure, the Soviet bloc and the Islamic group did not, by themselves, constitute a majority of the UNGA membership, but the program that the Castro/Qaddafi group had developed attracted the support of then newly-independent former colonies in Africa and Asia. Beyond that, a band of operatives of that new group used the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 to line up votes in support of their resolutions, resorting to intimidation as well as offers of benefits to countries or merely to ambassadors.

The UN's Preoccupation with Israel

In a recent article in *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* the historian Joel Fishman offered the following explanation of the now frequently used term *delegitimization*:

“The purpose of delegitimization on the international level is to isolate an intended victim from the community of nations as a prelude to bringing about its downfall or even destruction.”

It was with that goal in mind that the new UNGA majority proposed the “Zionism is Racism” resolution and got it adopted at the Assembly's 1975 session.

Israelis and Palestinians, together, constitute about two-tenths of 1% of the world population. It is, therefore, truly ironic that in recent years, year after year, more than 25% of the resolutions adopted by roll call vote at the UN General Assembly are directed against Israel. Furthermore, while most of the committees of the UN General Assembly deal with general policy or administrative topics (such as Disarmament and International Security, Social, Cultural, and Humanitarian Work; UN Staff Pensions, Conferences), the two sole exceptions are the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Human Rights Practices Affecting the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories.

The grouping that has dominated the General Assembly since the 1970's also has succeeded to establish an anti-Israel propaganda office in the UN Secretariat: the Division for Palestinian Rights. That division, fully staffed by UN employees, is located in the UN Department of Political Affairs. The Department has seven other divisions, five of them have regional mandates (including a Division on West Asia and the Middle East, which would be the appropriate place for consideration of Palestinian matters) and two are worldwide in scope. There is no other office in the UN Secretariat with a mandate as narrow as that of the Division for Palestinian Rights.

Israel is also a topic for consideration in the various subsidiary bodies of the United Nations. But in no body is it as central to the work of the entity as in the UN Human Rights Council, where Israel is the only single-state issue on the Council's permanent agenda and where no other issue takes as much time as does Israel and is the subject of as many resolutions as is Israel.

To confront the problem posed by the UN effort to delegitimize Israel, it is necessary to focus on the resolutions that renew annually the mandates of the three UN bodies which are at the core of that effort: the Palestinian Rights Committee, the Palestinian Division and the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Human Rights Practices. The United States has labeled them as "important." At the 2011 UNGA session they were adopted by the following votes:

Palestinian Rights Committee:	115 yes, 8 no, 53 abstain, 17 absent
Palestinian Rights Division	114 yes, 9 no, 54 abstain, 16 absent
Special Committee on Human Rights	86 yes, 9 no, 75 abstain, 23 absent.

The challenge is to reach out to the heads of government of (a) the states that do not vote "yes" as a matter of policy and persuade them to instruct their UN ambassadors to switch to "abstain." and (b) the states that express their position of not being "for" the resolutions by abstaining and persuade them to switch to "no." The resolutions would be defeated if the "no" votes are more than one-half of the "yes" votes. (A two-third majority is required for resolutions that have budgetary implications.)

Rejecting the Two-State Solution

Since the end of the Cold War, during which the PLO benefited from Soviet support, the United States has been vigorously at work in the G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, G.W. Bush, and Obama administrations to bring about an end to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict through a two-state solution. The “Clinton Parameters” which would have served to attain that goal were accepted by Prime Minister Barak but not by PLO leader Arafat. Prime Minister Olmert’s similar offer was not accepted by Mahmoud Abbas.

What is today increasingly clear is that the Fatah leadership is not prepared to authorize Mahmoud Abbas to enter into negotiations that will lead to a long-lasting two-state solution. Fatah intends to hold out for the claimed “right of return,” which would allow the migration to Israel of the surviving refugees of 1948 (less than 50,000) plus five million descendants of the Palestinian refugees of 1948, thus creating a Palestinian majority in Israel, which would proceed to liquidate the Jewish state.

It is because it refuses to enter into bilateral peace negotiations with Israel but is not ready at this time to join Hamas in making war on Israel, that the Fatah leadership has stepped up its efforts to substitute a multilateral effort for bilateral negotiations with Israel. Instead of accepting Prime Minister Netanyahu’s offer to negotiate a two-state solution in bilateral negotiations, Fatah has stepped up its efforts to line up votes at the UN to *impose* its peace conditions on Israel, including the claimed “right of return.” To attain that result, Fatah has added to the effort to delegitimize the existing State of Israel an effort to legitimize the non-existing “State of Palestine.” The Fatah leadership recognizes, of course, that the United States can be expected to veto any resolution that would impose peace conditions on Israel. It appears to hope that by pursuing the UN route and rounding up broad support for all its demands among the diplomats at the UN, it could persuade the United States ultimately to give in.

These appear to be the considerations that explain last year’s failed effort to get “Palestine” to be recognized by the UN as a member “state,” and this year’s effort, which is likely to succeed, to get the UN to declare “Palestine” to be a UN nonmember observer “state.” We can be confident that the United States will not support the bypassing of bilateral negotiations through ploys at the UN. But the United States should not stand alone. It is important to reach out the fair-minded heads of government throughout the world and inform them of the game that is being played at the UN, a game that places obstacles on the road to peace.

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