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The Palestinian Facebook Intifada and Campaign for Unilateral Statehood

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Palestinians are getting ready to divert the international spotlight away from the “Arab Spring” and focus it on their efforts to gain international recognition for a Palestinian state. Palestinian activists have called for a popular uprising against Israel on May 15. The two strongest Palestinian factions, Hamas and Fatah, signed a unity agreement to bolster the campaign to gain recognition of a Palestinian state by the United Nations in September.

The Obama Administration should warn Palestinians that adopting such a confrontational strategy would damage their relations with the United States, provoke a halt of American aid, and only delay the creation of a Palestinian state. Palestinian statehood should be considered only within the framework of peaceful negotiations, not through a violent uprising or a diplomatic end run around Israel.

Facebook Intifada. Following the lead of political activists who galvanized protests against Arab autocracies in recent months, Palestinian activists launched a Facebook campaign calling for a “Third Palestinian Intifada” on May 15, the annual observance of what the Palestinian Authority calls the Nakba (Arabic for “catastrophe”)—the establishment of Israel in 1948. The word *intifada* (“shaking off”) has become a synonym for a popular uprising involving political violence. Nearly 1,500 Israelis were killed in terrorist attacks in two previous Palestinian intifadas (1987–1991 and 2000–2004). Facebook removed the page in late March, after it had attracted over 330,000 followers, because its initial calls for peaceful protests were replaced by strident demands for violence against Israel.

The potential threat posed by calls for another intifada was further amplified by the May 4 reconciliation agreement reached between Fatah, the dominant political force within the Palestinian Authority, and Hamas, the Islamist extremist movement that emerged as an archrival after the first intifada. A previous unity agreement collapsed after Hamas narrowly defeated Fatah in elections in 2006 and seized power in Gaza in a bloody coup in 2007. After Hamas, backed by Iran and Syria, transformed Gaza into a terrorist base for launching rockets against Israeli civilians, Israel was forced to invade Gaza in December 2008 to curb the attacks.

Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority and top leader of Fatah, claims that he will remain in charge of peace efforts and that the unity government will rebuild Gaza and organize elections. But prospects for peace, already dim, will be shattered by including Hamas in a coalition government. Hamas remains wedded to terrorism and to its charter, which calls for the destruction of Israel and its replacement by an Islamic state.

President Abbas appears to have given up on peace negotiations and is now seeking U.N. endorsement for a unilateral Palestinian declaration

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of statehood at the annual convening of the General Assembly in September. Such a unilateral action would drive the last nail into the coffin of the Oslo peace process.

Declaring a Palestinian state before the signing of a peace agreement with Israel would put the cart before the horse. It would irreparably destroy any remaining trust between Israelis and Palestinians and set the two nations on a path toward war. The end result would be disastrous for Israeli, Palestinian, and American interests.

Unilateral Statehood Threatens Peace Prospects. The United States has invested almost 20 years of diplomatic capital and economic aid in promoting Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations. After the disastrous setback dealt by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who never fulfilled his commitment to abandon terrorism, the Bush Administration pressed political and economic reforms on Arafat’s successor, Abbas. It supported the appointment of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, who championed long-overdue reforms to combat corruption and build transparent and accountable Palestinian institutions. It also invested millions of dollars in building up reliable Palestinian security forces that can make peace possible by cooperating with Israel to fight terrorism.

Now all of these gains are in jeopardy of being rolled back if Hamas becomes part of a coalition government. Not only is Fayyad likely to be replaced and his reforms undone, but Hamas is certain to undermine the commitment of the Palestinian Authority to fight terrorism, making a genuine peace impossible. Ismail Haniyeh, regarded as one of Hamas’s more moderate leaders, criticized the recent death of Osama bin Laden, “an Arab holy warrior,” saying, “We regard this as a continuation of the American policy based on oppression and the shedding of Muslim and Arab blood.”¹

Clearly, not only is Hamas a threat to Israel and to peace prospects, but it is hostile to the United States. Yet Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has left the door open to continued American support for a

Palestinian Authority that includes Hamas. Such a naïve policy only invites disaster.

What the United States Should Do. To salvage the chances for a sustainable Israeli–Palestinian peace and reduce the threat of terrorism, the United States should:

- **Maintain pressure on Hamas.** Washington should abide by the diplomatic conditions set down by the Quartet (the U.S., the EU, Russia, and the U.N.) and rule out diplomatic contacts or negotiations with Hamas unless it halts terrorism, recognizes Israel, and complies with all agreements previously reached by Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Washington should also press the other members of the Quartet to keep this commitment.
- **Warn the Palestinian Authority against including Hamas in a ruling coalition.** Hamas is an ally of Iran that has killed Americans in terrorist attacks and has been designated as a foreign terrorist organization under U.S. law. The Obama Administration should warn Abbas that it will halt all U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority—about \$400 million this year—if Hamas becomes part of his government. Congress will certainly do this if the Administration drags its feet.
- **Consult with Israel on how to reinvigorate negotiations with the Palestinians.** President Obama should coordinate U.S. policy with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu when the two meet on May 20. Netanyahu is expected to unveil a new peace initiative when he speaks before a joint session of Congress on May 24, and the Obama Administration should work with Netanyahu as closely as possible to revive negotiations.
- **Block Palestinian attempts to gain U.N. support for unilateral statehood.** Washington should veto any attempt to approve unilateral Palestinian statehood at the U.N. Security Council and should make a determined effort to block approval of it in the General Assembly.

1. Ned Parker, “Hamas Denounces Killing of bin Laden,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 2011, at <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/may/02/world/la-fgw-bin-laden-hamas-20110501> (May 11, 2011).

No Shortcut to Peace. The only path to a genuine Israeli–Palestinian peace lies in direct negotiations between the two sides. This requires a good-faith effort by both to build a secure and stable peace. Hamas cannot contribute to such negotiations unless it has halted terrorism, recognized Israel, and accepted previous agreements. Palestin-

ian statehood is possible only with Israel's acceptance, not an end run through the U.N.

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