

# How Abbas's U.N. Gambit Empowered Hamas

Efraim Halevy September 23, 2011 | 12:00 am



Only once before has a U.S. President applied overt diplomatic pressure on Palestinians the way President Obama did this week at the United Nations, as he pressured Palestine to rescind its request from the U.N. Security Council for immediate full membership status. Unfortunately, the precedent for this type of overt pressure is not particularly encouraging, neither for Israel, nor for the United States.

It was in 2006 that President George W. Bush demanded that Hamas be allowed to participate in Palestinian general elections without it first having renounced the use of terrorism. It was an initiative that not only met resistance from Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, but also, in a rare meeting of minds, Israeli Prime Ministers Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert. All of them eventually surrendered to the

diktat of the U.S. President. The immediate result was that Hamas won the election; the long-term aftermath, of course, has yet to be resolved. There is currently no end in sight to the deadly confrontation between Hamas and Israel.

The short term benefactors of this most recent presidential intervention seems pretty clearly to be Israel. But the victory may soon prove pyrrhic. The sad truth is that the ultimate winner is likely to turn out again to be Hamas.

It's worth remarking that Obama's speech before the U.N. General Assembly on Wednesday was the most spirited pro Israeli speech he has ever made—indeed, one of the most pro-Israeli from a U.S. President in memory. Obama told Palestine in no uncertain terms that its diplomatic strategy will prove fruitless. Abbas still seems determined to try and muster the necessary votes in the Security Council, but he knows that an American veto awaits. Israel, which has rarely received such fulsome public support for its positions, was quick to celebrate it as a diplomatic coup.

But Israelis should not confuse a Palestinian defeat for an Israeli success. Yes, it is clear that Abbas's leadership is now fatally weakened. Nothing will erase the effect of this public defeat: Abbas has staked his

---

reputation on this diplomatic ploy, fashioned and promoted it around the world over the past year. The result is that he has ended up a disgraced loser, in the eyes of the world, and of his own people.

But this U.N. debacle is likely to lead to a precipitous decline in the prestige of the entire Fatah movement, a process that will only accelerate once a triumphant Netanyahu and despondent Abbas return home. We can expect widespread Palestinian demonstrations in Judea and Samaria in coming weeks, and they may be targeting both the Israeli and the Palestinian leadership.

In that way, Abbas's diminishment will mean Hamas's empowerment. The Hamas movement is the only player in the Middle East, aside from Israel, that has vocally opposed the current Palestinian statehood bid. (Needless to say, this is not the kind of ally that Israel should be wishing for.) The diplomatic games in New York, then, don't much reflect the reality on the ground in the Middle East. Far from being a moment of hubris for Israelis, this ought to be a moment of humility: Abbas's embarrassment at the U.N. will likely serve as a marker of the relative decline of Israeli regional strength.

Recent events in Cairo offer another stark reminder of that decline. The peace struck between Israel and Egypt over thirty years ago was largely the product of top secret contacts between the parties conducted without any outside intervention—indeed, with the United States presented with the historic breakthrough largely after the fact (though it played a vital role in its diplomatic consummation). That could hardly contrast more with Jerusalem's recent dependence on Washington to protect its interests in Egypt.

Two weeks ago, Israel just barely managed to save the lives of six security officers in its ransacked embassy in Cairo—and only with the help of personal diplomacy by President Obama. The happy outcome was not a foregone conclusion: It very well could have ended otherwise, with six body bags making their way back to Israel—a blow that would have been devastating for the country, and which would have triggered serious domestic consequences. Obama's intervention in Egypt, which risked his own tenuous credibility in the region, was an act of historic dimensions, and he deserves Israel's genuine gratitude. But it should also have spurred in Israel a moment of reflection about its newly imbalanced relationship with Washington.

That sort of dependency may only increase as Hamas and its Muslim Brotherhood partners becomes diplomatically ascendant in the region. Indeed, the most important political repercussions of this week's U.N. diplomacy will not be felt in Jerusalem, but on places far outside of Israel's control—namely, Cairo and Amman and elsewhere in the Arab world, as the masses there digest the scale of the Palestinian public humiliation and consider its consequences.

The United States and Israel may be tempted to cheer Abbas's failure this week, but they will also have to reckon with the fact it may also spell the demise of the Palestinian Authority as an effective partner. And if that happens, their tactical victories will likely prove to be part of a greater strategic defeat.

*Efraim Halevy is head of the Center for Strategic and Policy Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He served as chief of the Mossad from 1998 to 2002, and is the author of Man in the Shadows: Inside the Middle East Crisis with a Man who Led the Mossad.*



**The TNR iPad App**  
*Now available  
in the App Store*

**Source URL:** <http://www.tnr.com/article/world/95274/abbas-un-gambit-empowered-hamas>