



Policy Forum Report
October 26, 2011

Background

On October 26, 2011, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) and American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) convened a Policy Forum for key young leaders from the Washington policymaking community and selected representatives of the American Muslim community to discuss developments with Palestinian statehood. The following is a summary of the insights that emerged from the discussion.

Current Situation

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas applied for full membership of the United Nations on Sept. 23. In addition, the PA separately sought membership to UN bodies, including UNESCO. The PA is pushing ahead despite the US resolve to veto, unless peace talks are involved. To this point the Quartet: the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations have not agreed on a set of negotiating guidelines on borders, security, refugees and Jerusalem. The negotiations seem to be stagnant, but some progress has been made. Ten years ago it was taboo to say 'Palestine.' The two-state solution was regarded as appeasement to terrorists and anti-Semitic as it compromised Jerusalem. Today the two-state solution is the consensus on both sides. As the Palestinian identity has developed since 1968/1988, a one state solution is not realistic. Two-thirds of the population in the United States want to see a two-state solution.

US Veto

A bid for Palestinian Statehood at the UN is not unexpected, it has been discussed for three years. The Palestinian move to go to the UN is also not a rejection of negotiations. It is an attempt to gain legitimacy and to get the negotiations back on track. However, the recent bid from a foreign policy perspective is an example of how not to proceed. It would be a symbolic victory, but it is self-defeating because of the political backlash. It pushes the issue head on, Israel will reject it, and the United States will veto the bid unless it aligns with peace negotiations. The United States needs to figure out a way to take the momentum and redirect it to a better resolution or ensure there are fewer than 9 votes in the Security Council to avoid vetoing. The option of abstaining is not being considered.

Negotiations and Settlements

No action can be taken without both Israel and Palestine involved in the process, therefore negotiations are necessary. The continued and unprecedented rate of settlements in East Jerusalem being built deeply question the commitment to a two-state solution. There needs to be both the political practice on track as well as alignment on the ground. It would not solve the problem to demand a hard settlement freeze. The people in general want to live in peace. If the settlements impede peace then they don't support it. The current negotiations were negotiated before the settlement freeze.

Palestinian leader Abbas can't afford to return to talks right now. The conflict is in damage control mode. At this point, the idea of the two-state solution needs to be cultivated and kept alive. The reality is that a peace deal won't be reached in the next couple of years. There will not be unity between Hamas and Fatah soon, it is a zero-sum situation for both parties as they are better off not being unified. Current negotiations occur to trade prisoners. This encourages the kidnapping of

soldiers to gain bargaining chips. With the Arab Spring there is a shift to the Arab Street, which is not sympathetic to Israel. The Israelis have come to the sad reality with the terms on the ground. They accept there is always strife, tension, and rockets coming over. They have no incentive to come to the table as their security wall is up.

Consequences

The UN vote will not be the only diplomatic crisis and the decision and action needs to consider what will happen the day after the vote on the ground and around the world. One of the concerns is that aid will be cut off if Palestinian statehood is pushed. Sec. 414 of PL101-242 (1990) is a current law that states if the UN upgrades the PLO state the United States must cut off aid. If the United States or Israel cuts off aid and if the PA collapses there will be negative consequences. This is not in anyone's interest. It is also important to think of the long-term consequences of this law and precedent if aid is and relations are cut off from international organizations. On the Monday after the forum, UNESCO voted and approved Palestine to become a full member of UNESCO. The U.S. provides about 22% of UNESCO's funding and has threatened to withhold approximately \$80 million in annual funding to UNESCO in response to the vote.

Moving Forward

Prime Minister Salam Fayyad has taken on the job of delivering services and building institutions. Palestine needs to continue this good work as it has political benefits. There is already evidence that the Israeli military has been willing to give political returns for this development behavior.

To US Policymakers

The Arab Spring is an opportunity to make real progress. However, there is concern that the current Administration and members of Congress will use this opportunity for political gain. It is important to broaden the definition of what it means to be pro-Israel, it is necessary to differentiate between supporting Israel and the annexation of the West Bank.

The United States is losing leverage and much of the rhetoric is offensive. Senator Lieberman said he would never deal with Abbas and he called to remove him from power. This is understood by the Palestinians as a call to kill. The net effect will be bad for US national security interest as they are increasingly being seen as irrelevant and marginal. The US has no effect in Libya, no leverage in Syria apart from removing the ambassador, no leverage in Iran, and no leverage with the Israeli's and Palestinians. The United States has to be relevant to keep Israel safe, secure, and democratic.

There is significant change happening in the region. The United States has stayed with a vested interest in Israel and security. There is a re-emergence of the left and popular parties. There is regime change: Libya, Egypt, possibly Syria. The ground is shifting quickly and voices are coming out to put pressure. If the United States doesn't respond to that and re-evaluation policies, they will lose ground.