

Unilateral Declaration of a Palestinian State: Three Scenarios

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The failure of the Camp David II summit to achieve a comprehensive settlement with the Palestinians makes the unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, increasingly likely. The decisions of the leaders of the PLO institutions and the Palestinian Authority, along with the public pronouncements by the various senior Palestinian officials, underscore their determination to make such a declaration toward the end of 2000 or beginning of 2001, regardless of circumstances. The Palestinians are even preparing the military, infrastructure, and civilian spheres for possible violent confrontations with Israel that might ensue from the unilateral declaration of statehood. At the same time, the chances that any type of agreement acceptable to both sides will be concluded by September 2000 — the end of the interim agreement and the beginning of the period targeted by the Palestinians for the declaration of statehood and a factor which might enable the Palestinians to postpone the declaration — are extremely poor

Despite their avowed determination to declare statehood in the next few months (the words of PA Chairman, Yasser Arafat being that

whoever doesn't like such a declaration of statehood can go drink the waters of the Gaza sea or the Dead Sea), there is the impression that the Palestinians are not rushing to take such a step. It is clear to them that neither the domestic political ground nor the international and Arabic diplomatic ground is ready yet. First, the US has made it clear — and President Bill Clinton has stated publicly — that it is opposed to a unilateral declaration. Arafat also has received signals from the European Community that there would not be automatic recognition for a unilaterally declared state.

Second, the Arab countries are not rallying to back the Palestinians' steps, and are doing almost nothing to blunt US pressure. The lack of anticipation on the part of their Arab brethren finds expression in Arafat's words that if a summit of the Arab states (which the Palestinians are trying to organize, without success) decides on postponing the date for declaring a state, the Palestinians will accede.

Third, the Palestinians are concerned that a unilateral declaration will weaken those elements capable of restraining Israel from implementing harsh retaliatory measures (i.e. the international community, the Arab system, and the Israeli domestic

constituency), which in turn would freeze the political process, destroy what achievements have been made so far, and physically harm the infrastructure of the territories. This would be particularly true if widespread violence were to erupt in the wake of a unilateral declaration.

Despite the risks, the Palestinians might nonetheless unilaterally declare statehood, particularly if they assess there is no chance of advancing the political process in the coming months. Unless he scores other political achievements, Arafat will find it extremely difficult to postpone the declaration of statehood again (having already done so in May 1999), since the Palestinian political system and public have already been primed for the declaration of a state within a few months.

In such an event, three main scenarios should be considered with regard to possible developments on the ground and in the political sphere. We will refer to these scenarios as "calm", "moderate" and "stormy."

Calm Scenario

The essence of the "calm" scenario is the unilateral declaration of statehood with the Palestinians taking no steps to change the status quo on the ground. They would, instead, focus on the

political struggle to achieve broad international recognition of the state. In this framework, the Palestinians would embark upon a series of formal legal measures (such as imposing Palestinian law on the areas beyond Israel's 1967 borders and creating a constitution), public measures (elections to parliament, town councils and other institutions), economic-monetary measures (circulating a Palestinian currency), and political measures (working for recognition of the country as a full member of the United Nations, visits by foreign heads of state to the newly declared state). From the Palestinian viewpoint, this type of scenario neutralizes the possibility of a harsh Israeli reaction and blunts international objection to unilateral action. Once they achieve relatively broad international recognition for the state, they can renew the political process from the vantagepoint of a state having recognized borders.

From the Israeli standpoint, this scenario poses two central dilemmas. The first is whether to react with a counter-declaration of annexation of the territories that Israel wants to retain in the framework of a permanent agreement. The second is under what circumstances a Palestinian state should be recognized.

Moderate Scenario

The "moderate" scenario is a unilateral declaration of statehood, with the Palestinians generally maintaining the

status quo in terms of the territories under their control, with occasional attempts to nibble away at it. This assessment assumes that it will not be possible to bring about greater flexibility in Israel's position, and involves engaging the international system to bring pressure to bear on Israel without creating tension in the territories. Possible steps could include assuming control over security of Area B, where there is no Israeli presence in

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any event; attempting to end Israel's authority over the supervision of the international corridors connecting the West Bank to Gaza and the right to make arrests therein; peace marches on Israeli settlements in the West Bank with Gaza and sporadically blocking access to them; and actualization of Palestinian rule over East Jerusalem by opening of government offices there. The central problem in this scenario, from the standpoints of both the Israelis and the Palestinians, is how to avoid a vicious circle of provocation and reaction that might deteriorate into wide-scale violence.

Stormy Scenario

In the "noisy" scenario, which the media naturally dwell upon extensively, declaration of statehood is accompanied by guerilla warfare, armed confrontations and popular protest by Palestinians in the territories, Jerusalem and along the borders between Israel and the territories. In addition, there would be massive terrorist bombings within Israel's pre-1967 borders. There is a risk that this scenario might be played out by Palestinians who assess that the chances of achieving a state and the desired terms of a permanent settlement will be low unless there is a large "explosion" that will trigger a chain reaction in the Israeli, Arab and international spheres. Such a scenario also might develop as a result an unforeseen incident in the area or an ill-considered step by the Palestinians or Israel. This scenario contains great opportunities for the sides, but also great dangers.

The Palestinians would have the opportunity to achieve their historic national aspirations via drastic measures. At the same time, however, they would run the risk of inflicting mortal damage to their economy and infrastructure and lose generous international economic support. It could also bring about the collapse of the governmental-administrative system in the territories and wide-ranging reservations in the international community on the recognition of statehood.

Such Palestinian actions could have additional negative implications for Israel as well, including extensive loss of life, ferment among the Arabs of Israel, tension on the northern border, random firing along the borders with Jordan and Egypt, terrorist attacks against Israeli and/or Jewish targets in other countries, threat to diplomatic relations between Israel and the Arab countries, and heavy international pressure for bringing in peace-keeping forces and accepting a problematic agreement.

From the above, it can be assumed that both sides will avoid the "stormy" scenario. The Palestinians might attempt to reach a quiet understanding with Israel on ground rules to be employed following a unilateral declaration. One way or another, the "calm" and "moderate" scenarios are the most likely.

This assessment means the Palestinians will have to decide how

far to push their encroachment on the status quo without it leading to wide-scale violence accompanied by a loss of political, territorial, infrastructure and economic assets. They will also have to synchronize their steps for recognition and support by the international community, particularly in regard to issues connected with the boundaries of the state.

Israel will have to carefully assess the scope and force of its responses, and establish "red lines" which, if crossed, it would be prepared to respond with fire. In this context, the question arises as to whether to make this known in advance and via which channels. It will be important, in any event, that Israel maintain as many direct channels of communications as possible with the Palestinians at all levels, in order to prevent deterioration and to isolate flare-ups.

In the political sphere, Israel will have to cope with two central

questions: whether to respond to a Palestinian declaration of statehood with a counter-declaration of the annexation of territories (which might trigger violence, engender severe Arab and international reactions, create domestic divisions, and limit Israel's freedom of maneuver in terms of the renewal of negotiations), and whether and under what circumstances to recognize a Palestinian state.

Common sense dictates that recognition is given at the end of negotiations, after the sides have agreed to the borders between them. In view of the possibility, however, that there will be issues for which solutions cannot be found over a protracted period, it might be worthwhile to grant recognition in principle – only in general terms, without addressing borders – at the beginning of negotiations, in exchange for postponing the resolution of these issues.