

OPINION

Statehood via UN?

An opportunity for the US to bring compromise into reality

By Herbert C. Kelman

PRESIDENT OBAMA has made a commitment to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — a solution based on a historic compromise that would allow the two peoples to share the land that both claim and to which both are deeply attached.

But in a speech earlier this summer, the president said that “symbolic actions to isolate Israel at the United Nations in September won’t create an independent state,” seemingly implying that the effort to promote a UN resolution recognizing Palestinian statehood is inconsistent with his vision of two states for two peoples. To the contrary, the proposed resolution offers a unique opportunity to gain international support for this vision, while also addressing fundamental concerns of both sides — notably Palestinian concern for international recognition of their right to an independent state, and Israeli concern for recognition of Israel as the national home for the Jewish people.

The United States — in collaboration with its Quartet partners and Arab states — should take the initiative in drafting a resolution on recognition of a Palestinian state with the following key points:

■ **The UN recognizes** an independent Palestinian state in the context of a two-state solution that enables both the Palestinian people and the Jewish people to exercise their right to national self-determination in their own independent state, with full respect for the personal and collective rights of minority populations within each state.

This vision is grounded in the original UN Resolution 181, which called for the partition of mandatory Palestine into independent Jewish and Arab states; it has been the underlying assumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations since 1991; and it meets the conditions set by the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 for normalizing Israel’s relations with the Arab states.

■ **The resolution acknowledges** the successful efforts of the Palestinian Authority to build the institutions of an independent state, to develop the economy, and to strengthen internal security — all of which indicate its readiness to take on the responsibilities of independent statehood.

■ **The Palestinian state** will be established with borders based on the 1967 lines, modified by mutually agreed-upon exchanges of territories of equal size and value. Jerusalem will be shared by the two states, with East Jerusalem serving as the Palestinian capital and West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Arrangements to guarantee mutual security will be put in place.

■ **Israeli-Palestinian negotiations** will immediately address the precise borders between the two states, as well as security arrangements, bolstered by international guarantees. With the establishment of the Palestinian state, negotiations will turn to the major outstanding issues between the two states, including the status of the Old City of Jerusalem, the needs and rights of the Palestinian refugees, and the status of the Israeli settlers and settlements remaining within the borders of the new state.

A UN resolution drafted along these lines would have significant advantages for all parties.

For Palestinians, it would make the UN resolution more than a symbolic gesture and a tool in the diplomatic isolation of Israel; it would enhance the probability that this resolution would in fact bring a Palestinian state into being. It would also strengthen Palestinians in subsequent negotiations with Israel, which they would be able to enter as equals, on a state-to-state level.

For Israel, the proposed approach would not only avoid a UN resolution that isolates and delegitimizes the state internationally, but also gain Palestinian and international recognition of Israel as the state in which the Jewish people exercise their right to national self-determination, alongside the newly established Palestinian state, in which the Palestinian people exercise their national rights.

The United States, for its part, would save itself the diplomatic embarrassment of voting against — and probably vetoing — a resolution for Palestinian statehood and thus undermining its standing in the Middle East at this time of democratic awakening in the region; and it would reestablish its position as an honest broker in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

For all parties, it would create a new opportunity to resume serious negotiations of the remaining issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to bring the long-sought historic compromise to fruition.

Herbert C. Kelman is professor of social ethics emeritus and co-chair of the Middle East Seminar at Harvard University.