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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **UNSC vote on Palestine State: US Credibility at Stake**

By James M. Dorsey

### **Synopsis**

*President Mahmoud Abbas' decision to seek United Nations Security Council recognition of Palestinian statehood poses the most serious challenge to US credibility in the Arab and Muslim world. It will also weaken Israel's strategic links with Turkey, its most important Muslim ally.*

### **Commentary**

THE PALESTINE Authority is preparing to confront Israel's main ally, the United States, in the United Nations Security Council in a battle of wills over recognition of the Palestine State. This impending diplomatic clash will significantly undermine Washington's ability to protect its friend and could weaken its alliances in the Arab world.

A decision by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to request the Security Council rather than the UN General Assembly to recognise Palestinian statehood is designed to force the US to make good on its pledge to veto the resolution. The veto will significantly undermine US credibility and call into question President Barak Obama's support for the creation of a Palestinian state with borders based on the boundaries of Israel prior to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war in which it conquered the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem.

Mr. Obama has vowed to block UN recognition of the Palestinian state in support of Israel. He has argued that recognition would not further the Palestinian quest for statehood and has set aside warnings from Arab nations that the veto would affect their relations with the US. The president clearly feels that he cannot afford a bruising domestic battle with Israel's supporters in the US at a time when his ability to tackle the country's severe economic problems is in question and with presidential elections looming in just over a year.

### **Capitalising on popular revolt**

Mr. Abbas, by dropping his initial plan to seek recognition by the General Assembly, has opted for a head-on challenge with the US that is designed to exploit the mood of public opinion in the Arab world where popular revolts are fuelled in part by resentment at the impotence of their governments to effectively help Palestinians assert their rights. Arab states are under pressure to appear to back the Palestinians more aggressively after non-Arab Turkey set the tone earlier this month by expelling Israel's ambassador, downgrading diplomatic relations and suspending all military cooperation with it. In doing so, Mr. Abbas is riding the popular wave that in

Cairo led to the storming of the Israeli embassy by militant, highly politicised soccer fans.

Applying to the General Assembly would have allowed Mr. Abbas to adopt a formula that would have avoided a head-on collision with Washington. He could have sought recognition of Palestine as a state that would not become a UN member. The US does not have a veto in the General Assembly, in which a majority endorses recognition of Palestinian statehood; also its endorsement does not have to be approved by the Security Council as long as Palestine does not seek UN membership.

In forcing Arab states to rally around his quest for statehood, Mr. Abbas has thrown up a barrier to tacit efforts by Israel and the Gulf states to find common ground based on their eagerness to curb the tidal wave of anti-government protests sweeping the Middle East and North Africa that have already toppled the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya and are shaking the foundations of autocratic regimes in Syria and Yemen.

Both Israel and the Gulf states fear that the tidal wave threatens the existing order in the region and empowers the Arab street. It was barely noticed that during the storming of the Israeli embassy in Cairo the nearby Saudi embassy was targeted as well. The protesters vented their anger at the treatment of Egyptian pilgrims returning from the holy city of Mecca, who had been delayed for days at Jeddah airport. The pilgrims were insulted by Saudi officials for putting ousted President Mubarak on trial for responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of Egyptians in the revolt early this year that forced him out of office.

### **Political reality overrides common interest**

Israel and the Gulf states also share concerns about Egypt's Sinai peninsula becoming a largely abandoned frontier for weapons smuggling and human trafficking and that could become a launching pad for attacks on Israel alongside the Gaza Strip that is controlled by Hamas, the militant Palestinian Islamist group. Also, Israel and the Gulf states both view Iran as a major threat to regional stability; they do not want to see the Islamic republic succeed in its alleged efforts to develop a nuclear weapons capability.

All of that is secondary to the battle lines being drawn over Palestine. In a stark warning, Prince Turki al-Faisal, an influential member of the Saudi ruling family, warned that the kingdom will break with the US on Iraq, and perhaps on Afghanistan and Yemen, if the two countries were to go separate ways over next week's Palestinian bid for statehood. Prince Turki's remarks reflect a growing sense in Saudi Arabia that US support is as much a liability as it is an asset.

To be sure, the US, Israel and the Gulf states share a host of common political and economic interests. Yet, the opportunity to capitalise on that commonality is shrinking at the very moment when they would benefit most from increased cooperation. The risks involved in acting on those common interests grow by the day as the fallout from Turkey's rupturing ties with Israel becomes increasingly apparent. Besides, emotions and the political reality of Arab and Muslim public opinion are rising to the forefront with the Palestinians gearing up in the United Nations for recognition of their statehood.

That recognition is likely be a largely symbolic victory, but it is one that could dramatically change the legal playing field on which the Israeli-Palestinian battle is fought.

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