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*Israel and the Palestinian Bid
at the United Nations*

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Introduction

September 2011, which marks the annual meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations, represents pressure on Israel for different reasons. Both Israel and the Palestinian Authority had announced upon resuming negotiations in September 2010 that they seek to reach agreement within a period of a year at most, ending in September 2011. At the same time, the Quartet committee announced that Israel and the Palestinian Authority must reach an agreement by September 2011. In September 2010, US President Obama announced in his speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations that he wants to see Palestine as a member state of the United Nations by September 2011. At the beginning of September 2011, the two years assigned by the Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad for establishing the institutions of a Palestinian state and achieving independence came to end. On top of all these promises and deadlines came the announcement of the Palestinian leadership of its intention to go to the United Nations to bid for Palestine's accession as a full member of that organization according to the borders of June 1967.

The Palestinian Authority ceased negotiations with Israel after the Netanyahu government refused to stop settlement activity, and after the political process between them reached a dead end. The determination of the Palestinian Authority to appeal to the United Nations drew attention from elite circles in Israel. Netanyahu found himself pressured to propose an Israeli solution with the Palestinians, in order both to avoid a clash with the United States and to avert international pressure and political isolation.

In this paper, the position of Israel and its policy towards the Palestinian bid at the United Nations will be presented and analyzed, as will its current handling of the issue. The focus will be on the Netanyahu government's policy towards the Palestinian cause, as well as what Israel is seeking to achieve, what it fears in the Palestinians' petition to the United Nations, and its potential reactions to the bid.

Netanyahu's Policy toward the Palestinian Cause

Benjamin Netanyahu's victory in the last Knesset elections and the formation of the current Israeli government coincided with President Obama's accession to authority at the beginning of 2009. Benjamin Netanyahu, who leads the right and the extreme right in Israel, is considered one of the leading theorists of the Likud Party. Netanyahu's ideological and political power theory, based on the ideas of Jabotinsky, especially the "Iron Wall" doctrine that calls for the use of force and domination to achieve political objectives, is generally in line with the attitude of the Israeli community at large. A community of settlers who established their state at the expense of the Palestinian Arab people and on the ruins of their towns and cities, the Israeli people continue to espouse racist values vis-a-vis Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular. They resist

dialogue with the Arabs and only accept them in terms of power, domination, arrogance and exclusion. The Israeli State rejects peace with Palestinians if it should require a return to the June 4, 1967 borders. It seeks instead to dominate them and impose a "compromise" devised by the Israeli elite, rather than reaching a genuine and historic compromise with the input of Palestinians and Arabs.

The battle waged by Netanyahu's government, as in previous Israeli governments, is centered around the desire to cut the largest possible area of the West Bank of the Palestinian territory and annex it to Israel in any future solution, be it imposed by Israel via a de facto statute of limitations, or agreed upon with the Palestinian leadership. The Israeli settlement project in the West Bank Palestinian territory, especially in occupied East Jerusalem, is rooted in the basic technique of "Judaization", followed by annexation of the largest possible area of the occupied Palestinian West Bank to Israel. The Netanyahu government's policy toward the Palestinian issue can be summarized as follows:

- 1- Continuation of settlements in the West Bank Palestinian territory, especially in occupied East Jerusalem, in order to create a new demographic reality on the Occupied Palestinian Territory that enhances the settlement project and makes it difficult not only to remove it, but even to appeal for its removal.
- 2- Prolongation of multilateral pressure on the Palestinian people and leadership to bring about an erosion of the Palestinian position on all basic aspects of the conflict, especially regarding Palestinian land cut by Israel from the West Bank Palestinian territories for the benefit of its settlement project as a prelude to annexation to Israel.
- 3- Extension of the siege on Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip for as long as possible. The Netanyahu government seeks to continue to tighten the blockade, especially in its economic form in Gaza, and is working to hinder the delivery of basic materials to local industries in Gaza to destroy its economy and drive it to the edge of hunger. It further seeks to keep the Hamas government permanently occupied in the management of the Gaza Strip and the maintenance of the basic elements of life for people there.

For the occupied Palestinian West Bank, where Israel's main battle is taking place, the Netanyahu government continues to crack down and impose the blockade as much as is tolerated by the US administration and the international community. Netanyahu's government continues to practice direct military control throughout the West Bank, including carrying out raids and arrests almost daily and dividing the area into six regions using checkpoints, separation walls and settlements. These six regions are: the North Bank, the Central Bank, the South Bank, the Jordan Valley, the areas surrounded by the

separation wall located between the wall and the Green Line, and the Jerusalem area. Israel controls all traffic, including that of commuters, from one district to another.

- 4- Maintaining and deepening the split in the Palestinian national movement between Hamas and Fatah and increasing political and geographical separation between the West Bank and Gaza. This jeopardizes Palestinian national immunity and seeks by all means to prolong the Palestinian-Palestinian dispute for as long as possible, making disagreement the prevailing and permanent principal.

Israel's Concern over the Palestinian Bid

The Palestinian Authority's decision to go to the United Nations raised much concern in Israel from many corners - the government, the security institution, political parties and elite circles. The specific positions and reactions of the elite and the various parties toward the Palestinian decision depended on their position in the decision-making circle and their political alignment on the partisan map. The Israeli elite and some political parties, critical of Netanyahu's policy, urged him to show flexibility toward the Palestinian Authority and its concerns. They see the Palestinian move as being of utmost importance and have exaggerated its potential effects and consequences on Israel. Opposition parties, including Kadima, Meretz and the Labor party, participated in the process of highlighting the dangers of the Palestinian petition. The Israeli defense minister described the step taken by the Palestinians as a tsunami that threatens Israel.¹

The Israeli Government: Threats and Intimidation

From the outset, the Israeli government strongly opposed the Palestinian Authority's intention to go to the United Nations, believing this step to be inconsistent with the Oslo agreement and counterproductive to the political process between Israel and the Palestinian Authority — which has broken down, in any case. The Israeli government had earlier threatened the Palestinian Authority that Israel would take "unilateral" steps if the Authority insisted on going to the United Nations. Along with its threats toward the Palestinian Authority, Israel has been active at the international level, trying to thwart the Palestinian move or at least to minimize harm to its own interests. In March 2011, the Israeli government approached more than thirty key countries in the

¹ For more details on this subject, look at the workshop organized by the National Security Studies Institute of Tel Aviv University, under the title: "The Political Process in a Changing Strategic Medium", held on March 13, 2011, on the National Security Studies Institute site.

www.inss.org.il/heb/events.phb?cat=337&incat=&incat=&read=5009

world, including the member states of the Security Council, and cautioned them of the dangers of the Palestinian move, pointing out that it could push Israel to take unilateral steps. Throughout its intensive international campaign, Israel repeated its claims that the Palestinian move is in conflict with the Oslo agreement, will lead to violence, and cannot pave the way for Palestinian statehood - even if the UN were to approve the full membership of Palestine.²

Netanyahu Adheres to his Extremist Stance

Despite pressure on Netanyahu (both from circles inside Israel and from various countries in the world) since the Palestinians announced their intention to go to the United Nations, he has persisted in his refusal to freeze Israeli settlement in the West Bank. He has similarly refused to provide a political initiative that may dissuade the Palestinian Authority from going to the UN. In the context of his quest to maintain an expansionist policy toward the occupied territory and sustain the stability of his government, Netanyahu has been concerned with two basic circles. The first is his extremist government coalition, where he has sought to promote cohesion and avoid exposure to any disturbance. The second is the US Congress, where he has lobbied extensively in order to curb US pressure and obtain support for his eventual response to the Palestinian petition at the United Nations.

In his speech before the US Congress, and in many of his statements in other forums, Netanyahu has voiced commitment to his expansionist radical stance in all aspects of conflict with the Palestinians. He has confirmed his commitment to settlements and insisted on continued expansion in the West Bank Palestinian territories (especially in occupied East Jerusalem), without the possibility of returning to the borders of June 1967. He has refused the right of return for Palestinian refugees and the Israeli withdrawal from occupied East Jerusalem. He has gone on to state that what he calls "a united Jerusalem" will remain the eternal capital of Israel, also emphasizing the non-withdrawal from the Jordan Valley, under the pretext of security. Furthermore, Netanyahu has demanded that the Palestinian Authority recognize Israel as a Jewish state, and requires that a peace agreement with the Palestinian Authority must recognize the "Jewishness" of Israel. He strongly opposes Palestinian national unity, calling on the Palestinian Authority to revoke the reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah and demanding that Fatah choose between the political process with Israel and reconciliation with Hamas.

² Barak Ravid, "Israel threatens: We will take unilateral steps if you recognize Palestine", Haaretz, Mars 29, 2011. <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/objects/pages/PrintArticle.jhtml?itemNo-1222785>

In summary, Netanyahu has refused to recognize the Palestinian West Bank as occupied territory and insists on dealing with it as a disputed area between Israel and the Palestinians. Israel is seeking in this conflict the annexation of nearly half of that area.

In regard to his position on the Palestinian bid at the United Nations, Netanyahu expressed his belief before the Knesset's **Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee**, and in many of his statements, that "no one can stop the United Nations General Assembly from recognizing the Palestinian state in September", adding that Israel expects support from only a few countries in this matter. He expressed his belief in the improbability of the Palestinian Authority retreating from its plan of approaching the United Nations, emphasizing that Israel and the United States should thus intensify their efforts to increase the number of democratic countries (such as the European Union and other prominent Western nations) that would vote against the Palestinian bid or at least abstain from voting.³

Over the last few months, Israel has continued to pursue the issue of the Palestinian decision to go to the United Nations, making a simultaneous effort to reduce the consequences to its interests that could be caused by the Palestinian step. It has continued to threaten the Authority by suggesting that Israel has many potential methods of inflicting pressure at its disposal. In this context, the Israeli "Cabinet of Eight" held an expanded meeting on the August 10, 2011, which was attended by more than thirty officials from the different branches of the Israeli state. Leaders of the security forces, officials from the Ministry of Justice and military prosecutors discussed the Palestinian Authority's decision to go to the United Nations, as well as the steps that Israel should adopt to confront that decision.

Several ministers suggested in this meeting that Israel take punitive steps against the Palestinian Authority before the issue was raised at the United Nations, to force Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to back down from submitting the bid. Yuval Steinitz, the Israeli Finance Minister, suggested stopping the transfer of Palestinian tax funds to the Authority. Other ministers proposed more painful sanctions against the Palestinian Authority, the details of which were not disclosed. It seems that these proposals became so extreme that representatives both of the Ministry of Justice and the military prosecution opposed them. These extreme proposals as well as that to stop the transfer of Palestinian tax funds, though supported by Netanyahu, were rejected by Ehud Barak (Defense Minister) on the grounds that such sanctions could lead to the

³ Arik Bender, "Netanyahu: Abu Mazen took a strategic decision by going to the United Nations in any cases", Maariv August 1, 2011.
<http://www.nrg.co.il/Scripts/rtPrint/artPrintNew.php?channel=1&channelName=channel-news&ts-14042008120049>

collapse of the Palestinian Authority - thus occasioning the return of Israel's direct responsibility for the lives of Palestinians in the West Bank.⁴

The Israeli Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, has been very adamant in his aggressive and extreme attitude toward the Palestinian Authority's step, emerging as a leading proponent of the repeated demands to punish the Authority for its intentions. Although the Authority has strongly emphasized that any Palestinian protests or demonstrations accompanying the petition will be peaceful and non-violent, Lieberman has repeatedly accused the organization of planning unprecedented bloodshed. He has said in his statements that the Authority is preparing for demonstrations and marches involving tens of thousands of Palestinians who would violently attack Israeli checkpoints. Lieberman called for Israel to cut off relations with the Palestinian Authority on all levels, including security coordination, because "you cannot have security coordination [with Israel] while the Palestinian Authority is also trying IDF soldiers at [the International Criminal Court at] The Hague."⁵ It is worth noting that Lieberman's motives in accusing the Palestinian Authority of preparing for bloodshed were obvious even to many Israelis. Israeli journalist Akiva Eldar stated that Lieberman's remarks were made to prepare the Israeli public opinion for violent and aggressive reactions from the Israeli army and different Israeli security services against any manifestation of popular protests in the occupied Palestinian territories in September.⁶

The Israeli Security Institution and the Palestinian Bid at the United Nations

In contrast to the statements of Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, a report by the Israeli intelligence services provided to the Committee on Foreign Affairs and Security Committee of the Knesset stated that "no acts of violence and riots" are expected from the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinians in September 2011. The report stressed that the Palestinians do not believe that violent protests and demonstrations benefit them, and as such are preparing for peaceful and non-violent demonstrations and marches. The report pointed out the

⁴ Barak Ravid, "Defense Minister Ehud Barak: Sanctions against the Palestinian Authority might lead to its collapse", Haaretz, August 11, 2011.

<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/objects/pages/PrintArticle.jhtml?itemNo=1237843>

⁵ Barak Ravid, "Lieberman: The Palestinian Authority is planning for a bloodshed in September", Haaretz August 7, 2011.

<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/objects/pages/PrintArticle.jhtml?itemNo=1237404>

⁶ Akiva Eldar, "The people accept a national sedition", Haaretz, August 15, 2011.

<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/objects/pages/PrintArticle.jhtml?itemNo=1238199>

fear from Israeli security sources that an individual violent incident might ignite the region, and suggested summoning a portion of the Israeli army reservists to serve in September 2011.⁷

On the other hand, according to a report published in Haaretz, the Israeli army and police force have been seriously preparing for the various scenarios that may occur in September in the wake of the Palestinian petition at the UN. The report described an attitude of cautious anticipation vis-à-vis actions that could be taken by Palestinians in the occupied territories, as these actions are currently difficult to predict. There have been meetings between the leaders of the Israeli army and police force, wherein the two parties agreed on the geographical limits of responsibilities and tasks assigned to each of them. It is clear from the report that Israeli police have made a supreme effort to be prepared to face any eventuality in September 2011. A group of 7,400 Israeli police officers have accordingly received training and await deployment to sixteen command and control centers, with twenty additional brigades tasked specifically with suppressing Palestinian demonstrations. The report further stated that there will be 50 riot police officers in every police station ready to face any emergency. The Israeli police have also prepared sixteen containers of 200,000 liters each of a quickly dispersing, foul-smelling liquid for crowd control against Palestinian demonstrators, distributed to points of expected confrontation.⁸

The Israeli army, for its part, has also made extensive preparations to face Palestinian demonstrations and marches, with the leaders of the army and police force meeting to discuss their mutual policy vis-a-vis Palestinian demonstrators. They debated the merits of adopting extreme measures and establishing clearly delineated limits not to be crossed by protestors (an approach that would run the risk of causing a large number of Palestinian deaths and injuries), as opposed to pursuing a more flexible policy that would reduce the likelihood of loss of life among the Palestinians. The report did not reveal the decision that was ultimately taken on this issue.⁹

Preparing and Training Settlers

The Israeli army has made a great effort in training and preparing the settlers to face the anticipated Palestinian demonstrations. The military identified dozens of settlements in the Palestinian Bank nearby Palestinian villages and towns which might serve as destinations for

⁷ “Classified Israeli report: Violence is unexpected in September”, YNet, August 3, 2011.
<http://www.ynet.co.il/Ext/Comp/ArticleLayout/CdaArticlePrintPreview/1,2506,L-4104194,00.html>

⁸ Amir Oren, “Police is getting ready”, Haaretz, August 12, 2011.
<http://ww.haaretz.co.il/hasite/objects/pages/PrintArticle.jhtml?No=1237896>

⁹ *Ibid.*

Palestinian marches and demonstrations. The Israeli army has identified two lines of defense for each settlement. Settlers in the first line of defense would use tear gas to stop the marches, while, in the second line of defense (described as “the red line”, which Palestinians are strictly prohibited from traversing), settlers would use live ammunition against Palestinian demonstrators.¹⁰ The army distributed letters to officials in the Israeli settlements, asking them to provide petrol stations with enough fuel and settlers with sufficient materials in case it should later become impossible to deliver the necessary provisions due to marches and other activities being carried out by the Palestinians.¹¹

In addition to these repressive security preparations, Israel’s security establishment has issued recommendations to the political leadership urging them to take steps toward building confidence between Israel and the Palestinian leadership. The steps are also intended to ease the tension in the Palestinian street, so as to reduce the possibility of violence that might accompany Palestinian demonstrations in September. The recommendations included the release of Palestinian prisoners, particularly those from the Fatah movement, as well as increasing the number of Palestinian workers from the West Bank territories who are allowed to work inside Israel in the fields of agriculture and construction.¹²

Israeli Fears of the Palestinian Bid at the United Nations

Israel’s opposition to the Palestinian move is due to a variety of possibilities which Israel fears might result from the bid for membership at the United Nations. These fears can be summarized as follows:

- 1- The Palestinian bid holds the possibility of freeing the Palestinian Authority from the restrictions of absurd bilateral negotiations with Israel, which were often used to strengthen Israel’s settlements in the West Bank Palestinian territory; the transfer of the Palestinian issue to the United Nations opens up prospects for the Palestinians in their struggle for the removal of occupation and settlement of lands occupied in 1967.
- 2- This step, especially if successful, might produce a change in the nature of the relationship between Israel and the Palestinian leadership and lead to increased independence of Palestinian decision-making from Israel.

¹⁰ Chaim Levinson, “The military is training settlers to get ready for confronting Palestinian marches towards settlements in September”, Haaretz, August 30, 2011.

<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/objects/pages/PrintArticle.jhtml?itemNo=1240014>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Attila Somfalvi, “Palestine on the Way: Israeli military recommends releasing prisoners”, YNet, August 15, 2011. <http://www.ynet.co.il/Ext/Comp/ArticleLayout/CdaArticlePrintPreview/1,2506,L-4109324,00.html>

- 3- The bid might succeed, despite the US veto in the Security Council, in granting Palestine the recognition of the General Assembly of the United Nations as a full member of the UN according to the borders of June 1967. This would reinforce the position of the Palestinian issue and accord Palestine a new status, that of a state under the occupation and invasion of another UN member state (rather than a disputed area, as Israel currently describes it).
- 4- If the Palestine bid should prove successful, with Palestine gaining full membership in the United Nations, it would acquire a new international, political and legal status, enabling it to address both the UN and the international community on new grounds. This would throw open the door for it to then petition these dual audiences to force Israel to end its occupation of the Palestinian state, and to impose painful sanctions on Israel in the case of its refusal. Moreover, the moment Palestine is granted full membership to the UN, Israel will become not just a state that occupies another member state, but also an invading nation – this will invite the imposition of serious sanctions on Israel.¹³ A related concern is that Palestine will resort to the General Assembly of the United Nations on the basis of the UN resolution 377, entitled "Uniting for Peace", requesting that sanctions be imposed on Israel. The success of such a step would put Israel in a position similar to that of South Africa at the time of apartheid.
- 5- There could be an escalation of the international isolation experienced by Israel, especially in light of the Arab Spring and the ensuing changes in the Arab Middle East. Israel realizes that its position vis-a-vis all aspects of the Palestinian situation is sharply at odds with that of most of the rest of the world, including the European Union countries and other powerful nations; this is especially true in relation to the fate of the occupied Palestinian territories and the borders of a Palestinian state. The success of the Palestinian petition to the United Nations, and the capitalizing on this success by Palestine and the Arab countries, could serve to deepen the international isolation of Israel.
- 6- Israel's growing dependence on the political support of the US in international forums might affect the quality of the relationship between Israel and the US administration, in light of the above-mentioned international isolation. This could reduce Israel to being a burden on the United States rather than an asset to it, diminishing the smaller country's ability to fend off US requests or pressure.

¹³ A number of eminent Israeli lawyers adopt this view. For further details, look at the interview with Gabriela Shalev, the former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, with the Maariv Newspaper, under the title "Alone Versus the Whole World" pages 17 – 19, dated September 2, 2011.

- 7- The recognition of Palestine as a full member of the United Nations might affect the status of the settlements and settlers in the West Bank Palestinian Territory, including those in occupied East Jerusalem, thus facilitating the imposition of sanctions on the settlements and settlers.

Potential Israel Reactions to the Palestinian Bid

In theory, Israel has a wide range of potential reactions to the Palestinian bid at its disposal. It could theoretically take many retaliatory steps against the Palestinian Authority, such as halting the transfer of tax funds owed to the Authority, restricting the freedom and movement of the Authority leadership, and putting the Authority under siege through a comprehensive boycott. Effecting any of these steps could result in the collapse of the Authority, if sustained over a long period of time, and the collapse of the Authority would mean the return of direct Israeli occupation of the West Bank. Israel also theoretically has the possibility of officially annexing portions of the Palestinian West Bank to its own territories, as in the annexation of some or all of the settlement blocs set up by the occupation over the past decades.

However, it is difficult to imagine that Israel would take any of these steps without having previously obtained the green light from the US administration, and it is highly unlikely that such a green light would be forthcoming at the present time.

Israel recognizes that taking serious punitive steps against the Palestinian Authority, or the annexation of parts of the West Bank to its own territories, might provoke the United Nations and the international community to accelerate the imposition of highly uncomfortable measures against Israel itself. This is especially concerning to Israel at a time when it is losing many of its regional allies as a result of the Arab Spring and the associated changes affecting the region.

In light of this, Israel will seek to achieve the following:

- 1- Come to an understanding with the US administration that the US veto will be used in the Security Council, and work to shape joint Israeli-American policy to counter the Palestinian bid and mitigate its consequences to Israel.
- 2- In recognition of the fact that there is a majority at the United Nations that would vote in favor of the Palestinian petition, work to reduce the size and cohesion of this majority.
- 3- Exercise covert pressure on the leaders of the Palestinian Authority (reaching the level of blackmail) in order to influence its stance toward the Palestinian bid. If indeed the Palestine appeal to the United Nations should succeed, Israel will then try to reach an

understanding with the leadership of the Authority that this step should suffice, without further demands to the United Nations and the international community for boycotts or sanctions against Israel. It will do its best to steer the Palestinian Authority toward bilateral negotiations, as these have served for almost two decades as both a cover for the continued establishment of settlements and a protective shield against the imposition of sanctions on Israel.