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After the Quartet Statement: Is Abbas the Odd Man Out?

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The Quartet for Middle East peace -- consisting of the United States, European Union, Russia, and the UN secretary-general -- recently issued a long-awaited statement calling for the resumption of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians "without delay or preconditions," toward the goal of reaching a peace agreement by the end of 2012. The statement was issued on September 23, immediately after Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu delivered opposing speeches on the Palestinian application for full UN membership. Netanyahu has made clear that he accepts the Quartet's proclamation. Yet while Abbas has declared that a Palestine Liberation Organization panel in Ramallah will consider the statement, he has publicly preconditioned his acceptance on an Israeli settlement freeze.

At its core, the Quartet failed to draft a statement on substance because its members could not agree on issues such as explicit recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. They opted instead for a statement on process because they could agree on calling for unconditional and direct negotiations between the parties. In the wake of the UN speeches and Netanyahu's acceptance of unconditional talks, Abbas now seems to be the odd man out, though renewed Israeli construction in east Jerusalem could alter that dynamic.

What the Statement Included and Excluded

Expected as far back as July, the Quartet's statement was delayed due to various differences between its members, resulting in certain issues going unmentioned. For example, the final product did not include a call for a settlement freeze. Contrary to some reports, however, omitting such a call has been the norm over the past six Quartet statements, not the exception. The last statement to mention a freeze was issued in February, and even then the Quartet limited itself to expressing concern that the ten-month settlement moratorium was not extended rather than issuing a fresh call for a freeze.

Instead of mentioning a freeze, the new statement calls on the parties to "refrain from provocative actions if negotiations are to be effective." It also mentions the 2003 Quartet Roadmap, which did call for a settlement freeze. Taken together, such language could be interpreted as a new reference to settlements. Yet Israel could just as well interpret "provocative" as referring to Abbas's move at the UN, which it sees as a breach of Palestinian commitments under the Oslo Accords.

Going forward, it remains unclear whether Israeli construction on 1,100 new units in the southeast Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo -- located on the Palestinian side of the Green Line -- will have any effect on the Quartet's stance. The United States and Europe immediately condemned the move, and EU foreign policy chief Lady Catherine Ashton called on Israel to reverse the decision. Although Israel does not regard new housing in east Jerusalem as "settlements," Europe does. Privately, U.S. officials have indicated that they will urge Israel to avoid any serious expansion of settlements in order to avoid a confrontation.

Other major issues were also missing from the Quartet statement. As mentioned previously, there is no reference to Israel as the national homeland of the Jewish people, apparently due to European and Russian fears of antagonizing the Palestinians. Accordingly, the statement also omits explicit mention of the major concession expected of Israel, namely, territorial withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines with land swaps. Absent such parameters, the new statement cannot be taken as terms of reference for the resumption of negotiations. Instead, it employs more general language such as the following passage: "The Quartet reaffirmed its statement of 20 May 2011, including its strong support for the vision of Israeli-Palestinian peace outlined by [the U.S. president]," referring to Obama's past remarks detailing the "pre-1967 borders plus land swaps" approach. Furthermore, by using the word "vision" rather than explicitly mentioning Obama's May 19 speech, the Quartet also accommodates his related May 22 speech, which hinted at slightly larger land swaps to facilitate Israeli retention of larger settlement blocs. The size of potential land swaps was a key point of Quartet debate this summer, with Obama's minimalist May 19 reference to "agreed upon swaps" pitted against his May 22 statement that swaps should "account for the changes over the last forty-four years...including new demographic realities on the ground."

New Deadlines

To address Palestinian sensibilities, the Quartet put forth a deadline of December 2012 for the conclusion of a peace agreement. Yet unlike the statement that immediately preceded the September 2010 negotiations, the new Quartet proposal calls for an unspecified agreement. Last year's statement called for resolving all "final-status" issues -- an umbrella term that includes Jerusalem as well as Palestinian refugees -- and many commentators viewed such expectations as unrealistic.

In contrast, the new statement's mention of a peace agreement appears in a paragraph focusing on borders and security, suggesting that any accord would be based on those particular issues. Moreover, for the first time, the Quartet has provided a timetable for dealing with borders and security, calling on the parties to field proposals within the next three months and insisting on substantive progress within six months. The statement also calls for a preparatory meeting between the parties within the month to "agree to an agenda and a method of proceeding in the negotiations." According to a German spokesman, Chancellor Angela Merkel phoned Abbas on Monday and urged him to reply favorably.

UN Calculations and Miscalculations

Although the Quartet statement does not take a stand on the Palestinian application for UN membership, focusing instead on the resumption of peace negotiations, it is difficult to divorce the two issues. In the end, Abbas will likely reject the Quartet's call for talks out of fear that it will derail the international and domestic momentum he has built for the UN bid, despite Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's role in approving the Quartet statement. Abbas is more likely to interpret the statement as a possible alternative course of action for UN Security Council (UNSC) members who remain undecided as to how they will vote on the Palestinian application.

Yet Abbas seems to have miscalculated the direction of the Quartet and the UNSC member countries. Although his speech received extensive applause in the General Assembly, his bid to gain UNSC approval is losing momentum. Per the council's rules, full admission to the UN requires affirmative votes from nine of the fifteen UNSC members, barring a veto by a permanent member such as the United States. Hoping to avoid casting its veto, the United States has held consultations with most of the other council members. Thus far, only six UNSC states have openly supported the Palestinian bid: Russia, China, Lebanon, India, Brazil, and South Africa. Although the United States, Germany, and possibly Britain and France are the only members who seem poised to vote against it, several other countries -- namely Portugal, Bosnia, Nigeria, Colombia, and Gabon -- have refrained from voicing support and could abstain from the vote altogether.

Meanwhile, French president Nicolas Sarkozy has publicly urged the Palestinians to appeal for upgraded status at the General Assembly that would fall short of full membership. Abbas may well change gears in the

coming weeks and pursue that option if he realizes that the UNSC is a losing proposition. In that case, he may decide he is tactically better off postponing talks with Israel still further.

Although the momentum of the UN bid has stalled internationally, it has bolstered the domestic standing of both Abbas and Netanyahu, whose approval ratings have improved considerably in the wake of their UN speeches. This could afford them the political cover they need to return to negotiations, if they are willing. Upon his return to Ramallah earlier this week, Abbas received a hero's welcome for his speech, which was telecasted live in one of the city's squares and focused largely on reiterating the Palestinian narrative of the conflict and presenting the plea for UN membership. According to the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 83 percent of Palestinians favored the UN move despite their expectation that it would change little on the ground.

For his part, Netanyahu has welcomed the Quartet statement because it raises the possibility of resuming peace talks, which he has long favored. Moreover, a Haaretz-Dialog poll conducted in the aftermath of the UN speeches revealed that the Palestinian gambit has bolstered his standing. Both Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman and Strategic Affairs Minister Moshe Yaalon -- the Netanyahu cabinet's greatest skeptics toward peace talks -- have called for a favorable Israeli reply to the Quartet statement and the resumption of negotiations.

As for the content of his UN speech, Netanyahu came closer than ever to supporting President Obama's peace plan, stating: "American officials have put forward ideas to restart peace talks. There were things in those ideas about borders that I didn't like. There were things there about the Jewish state that I'm sure the Palestinians didn't like. But with all my reservations, I was willing to move forward on these American ideas." In a variety of media interviews during his UN visit, Netanyahu confirmed widespread assumptions regarding past tensions with the Obama administration, but he also indicated that his relations with the administration over the past four months have been better than ever.

Conclusion

Abbas's UN initiative may have attracted widespread media coverage, but he has miscalculated the sentiment of the international community, which favors the resumption of peace negotiations. Although the Quartet's failure to agree on the substance of such negotiations speaks to the lack of international unity on certain issues, the United States and Israel can be satisfied with the Quartet's focus on unconditional, direct talks between the parties.

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