

# Palestine Self-Determination: UN Bid Heralds Death of Palestine's Old Guard

New leaders will spurn two states

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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*Amid the enthusiastic applause in New York and the celebrations in Ramallah, it was easy to believe — if only a for minute — that, after decades of obstruction by Israel and the United States, a Palestinian state might finally be pulled out of the United Nations hat. Will the world's conscience be midwife to a new era ending Israel's occupation of the Palestinians?*

It seems not.

The Palestinian application, handed to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon last week, has now disappeared from view — for weeks, it seems — while the United States and Israel devise a face-saving formula to kill it in the Security Council. Behind the scenes, the pair are strong-arming the Council's members to block Palestinian statehood without the need for the US to cast its threatened veto.

Whether or not President Barack Obama wields the knife with his own hand, no one is under any illusion that Washington and Israel are responsible for the formal demise of the peace process. In revealing to the world its hypocrisy on the Middle East, the US has ensured both that the Arab publics are infuriated and that the Palestinians will jump ship on the two-state solution.

But there was one significant victory at the UN for Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the Palestinian Authority, even if it was not the one he sought. He will not achieve statehood for his people at the world body, but he has fatally discredited the US as the arbiter of a Middle East peace.

In telling the Palestinians there was “no shortcut” to statehood — after they have already waited more than six decades for justice — the US President revealed his country as incapable of offering moral leadership on the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If Obama is this craven to Israel, what better reception can the Palestinians hope to receive from a future US leader?

One guest at the UN had the nerve to politely point this out in his speech. Nicholas Sarkozy, the French president who himself appears to be wavering from his original support for a Palestinian state, warned that US control of the peace process needed to end.

“We must stop believing that a single country, even the largest, or a small group of countries can resolve so complex a problem,” he told the General Assembly. His suggestion

was for a more active role for Europe and the Arab states at peace with Israel.

Sarkozy appeared to have overlooked the fact that responsibility for solving the conflict was widened in much this way in 2002 with the creation of the Quartet, comprising the US, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations.

The Quartet's formation was necessary because the US and Israel realised that the Palestinian leadership would not continue playing the peace process game if oversight remained exclusively with Washington, following the Palestinians' betrayal by President Bill Clinton at Camp David in 2000. The Quartet's job was to restore Palestinian faith in — and buy a few more years for — the Oslo process.

However, the Quartet quickly discredited itself too, not least because its officials never strayed far from the Israeli-Washington consensus. Last week senior Palestinian negotiator Nabil Shaath spoke for most Palestinians when he accused the Quartet's envoy, Tony Blair, of sounding like an "Israeli diplomat" as he sought to dissuade Abbas from applying for statehood.

And true to form, the Quartet responded to the Palestinians' UN application by limply offering Abbas instead more of the same tired talks that have gone nowhere for two decades.

The Palestinian leadership's move to the UN, effectively bypassing the Quartet, widens the circle of responsibility for Middle East peace yet further. It also neatly brings the Palestinians' 63-year plight back to the world body.

But Abbas' application also exposes the UN's powerlessness to intervene in an effective way. Statehood depends on a successful referral to the Security Council, which is dominated by the US. The General Assembly may be more sympathetic but it can confer no more than a symbolic upgrading of Palestine's status, putting it on a par with the Vatican.

So the Palestinian leadership is stuck. Abbas has run out of institutional addresses for helping him to establish a state alongside Israel. And that means there is a third casualty of the statehood bid – the Palestinian Authority. The PA was the fruit of the Oslo process, and will wither without its sustenance.

Instead we are entering a new phase of the conflict in which the US, Europe, and the UN will have only a marginal part to play. The Palestinian old guard are about to be challenged by a new generation that is tired of the formal structures of diplomacy that pander to Israel's interests only.

The young new Palestinian leaders are familiar with social media, are better equipped to organise a popular mass movement, and refuse to be bound by the borders that encaged their parents and grandparents. Their assessment is that the PA – and even the Palestinians' unrepresentative supra-body, the PLO – are part of the problem, not the solution.

Till now they have remained largely deferential to their elders, but that trust is fast waning. Educated and alienated, they are looking for new answers to an old problem.

They will not be seeking them from the countries and institutions that have repeatedly

confirmed their complicity in sustaining the Palestinian people's misery. The new leaders will appeal over the heads of the gatekeepers, turning to the court of global public opinion. Polls show that in Europe and the US, ordinary people are far more sympathetic to the Palestinian cause than their governments.

The first shoots of this revolution in Palestinian politics were evident in the youth movement that earlier this year frightened Abbas' Fatah party and Hamas into creating a semblance of unity. These youngsters, now shorn of the distracting illusion of Palestinian statehood, will redirect their energies into an anti-apartheid struggle, using the tools of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience. Their rallying cry will be one person-one vote in the single state Israel rules over.

Global support will be translated into a rapid intensification of the boycott and sanctions movement. Israel's legitimacy and the credibility of its dubious claim to being a democracy are likely to take yet more of a hammering.

Events at the UN are creating a new clarity for Palestinians, reminding them that there can be no self-determination until they liberate themselves from the legacy of colonialism and the self-serving illusions of the ageing notables who now lead them. The old men in suits have had their day.

**Jonathan Cook** won this year's Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is [www.jkcook.net](http://www.jkcook.net).

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