

MEMMO

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Palestinians Must Focus on Talks, Not Unilateral Steps

The Palestinian Authority (PA) is refusing to accept the Obama administration's new diplomatic initiative to address core issues through U.S. bilateral engagement followed by direct talks between Israelis and Palestinians. Instead, the PA is seeking U.N. backing for a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood – a move backed by Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Uruguay. Wisely, the United States has discouraged this unilateral approach. America should continue its long-standing support for negotiations to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and oppose harmful unilateral efforts.

The United States has proposed a new peace initiative in the face of the PA's refusal to resume direct talks with Israel.

- Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced in a major policy speech that the United States aims to “push the parties to lay out their positions on the core issues without delay and with real specificity.”
- In her Dec. 10 speech to the Brookings Institution's Saban Forum, Clinton expressed hope that U.S.-led talks with both parties will eventually lead to direct talks between them and allow the two sides to negotiate a framework agreement.
- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu immediately welcomed the Obama administration's new plan, saying, “It is good for peace. To reach peace, we have to discuss the issues that are truly delaying peace.”
- By contrast, PA President Mahmoud Abbas has yet to respond to Clinton's proposal and continues to set preconditions for serious talks with Israel, a position backed by the Arab states.
- In addition to welcoming the latest U.S. proposal, Netanyahu has taken far-reaching steps to pave the way for substantive talks with the Palestinians—calling for a Palestinian state, reducing barriers to movement in the West Bank and implementing an unprecedented 10-month West Bank housing construction moratorium.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has welcomed the new U.S. plan to resume talk with the Palestinians.

The administration and Congress have rejected unilateral moves by the Palestinians to garner recognition of a Palestinian state.

- In recent months, the Palestinians have spoken openly about declaring a state unilaterally and seeking recognition for it from the international community. To date, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Uruguay have announced their recognition of a “Palestinian state.”

- On Dec. 15, the House passed a resolution offered by Reps. Howard Berman (D-CA) and Ted Poe (R-TX) by voice vote opposing any PA efforts to unilaterally declare statehood or seek recognition for a state outside of talks with Israel. The resolution was cosponsored by Reps. Shelley Berkley (D-NV), Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), Gary Ackerman (D-NY) and Dan Burton (R-IN).
- The resolution, which calls for a negotiated settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, urges the Obama administration to “lead a diplomatic effort to persuade other nations to oppose a unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state” and to affirm that America would not recognize such a state.
- The Obama administration also opposes a unilateral declaration of statehood. “Unilateral efforts at the United Nations are not helpful and undermine trust,” Clinton said in her recent policy address.

Palestinian efforts to create a state outside talks would undermine efforts to solve the conflict.

- Since a final agreement requires Israeli agreement and U.S. backing, unilateral action by the Palestinians to seek statehood would undermine the goal of obtaining statehood.
- A unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state would not solve any of the difficult issues at the heart of the dispute: borders, refugees, Jerusalem, security arrangements and water.
- Also, a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood would sour an already tense atmosphere and further undermine trust, making an eventual negotiated agreement more remote.
- In an interview with the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, Rep. Berman characterized the Palestinian strategy as “self-defeating, and it’s going to hurt their cause.” In a separate interview with *The Jerusalem Post*, Berman, who chairs the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said a unilateral declaration of statehood would also jeopardize U.S. funding to the PA.

The United States should continue to push the Palestinians to accept the new U.S. formula and return to the table.

- The United States should press Abbas to embrace the new U.S. initiative and enter into negotiations immediately.
- The United States should also continue pressing the Arab states to back the resumption of peace talks and to provide political cover and financial aid to the PA.
- In order to ensure that the Palestinians do not take unilateral action, the United States must continue to publically and privately make clear it would oppose such steps and urge the Palestinians to resume negotiations without preconditions.
- As stated in the House resolution calling for a negotiated solution to the conflict and rejecting unilateral steps by the Palestinians, the United States should also conduct a diplomatic campaign to press other nations to refrain from recognizing a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood.