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Obama Backs Occupation of Palestine

by Sheldon Richman
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The Obama administration's hypocritical vow to block full UN membership for Palestine shames America. Only a hypocrite could proclaim support for the Arab Spring while opposing this step toward realizing the Palestinian aspiration to be free from the 44-year-old Israeli occupation of the West Bank and subjugation of Gaza.

The Palestinians have been under brutal and degrading occupation since the 1967 Six-Day War, which they did not start. Their daily lives, when not punctuated by shootings, beatings, and bulldozing of homes and olive groves, are scarred by routine humiliation: military checkpoints, road blocks, arbitrary searches, unpredictable delays, and an inhumanely disruptive "security" wall. No one should have to live like that, yet two generations of Palestinians have been subjected to this cruelty. Some Palestinians, mostly in Gaza, have responded with attacks on Israeli civilians. However comprehensible, it is nonetheless vicious, criminal action.

Negotiations have produced no progress. In 1988 Palestinian leaders relinquished claim to 78 percent of historic Palestine, despite the 750,000 Arabs driven from their homes when Israel declared its independence in 1948. A UN gerrymandered plan to divide Palestine into Jewish and Palestinian Arab states was thwarted by the future Israeli leaders' collusion with the king of Jordan to deprive the Palestinians of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, part of their assigned portion of the territory. Then in 1967 Israel wrested the West Bank from Jordan and Gaza from Egypt, and its brutal, grinding occupation began.

Why have negotiations gone nowhere? Primarily because Israeli leaders show no intention of giving up the West Bank, which they call Judea and Samaria and claim as part of Greater Israel. At most they would permit a few self-governing towns connected by Israeli-controlled roads. The on-and-off negotiations have been undermined by Israeli insistence on confiscating land on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem for Jewish-only settlements. Someone has likened this so-called peace process to negotiations to divide a pizza in which one person talks while the other eats. Today, half-a-million Israeli Jews live in those settlements.

When the Palestinians demand a halt to settlement-building, the Israeli government replies there must be no “preconditions” to negotiations: everything should be on the table, including the building. The game is thus rigged. Now and then an American administration has mildly admonished Israel for that policy and even pressured for a suspension. There were never teeth in the U.S. policy, and not a dime of the billions in annual aid was withheld. The few times Israel seemed to agree to stop building, it merely slowed down or expanded existing towns rather than break ground on new ones. The cynical game is shamefully transparent. It fools Americans, but not Palestinians or anyone else.

Now, with the Arab Spring inspiring the world, the Palestinians have said with calm dignity, “Enough,” and have asked the UN for full membership for Palestine. What does the Obama administration say? It vows to veto the Security Council resolution if necessary. Obama’s UN speech was a tissue of fallacies claiming that a UN resolution cannot bring peace or replace negotiations. No Palestinian said it could. Negotiations over borders and other matters would follow — if Israel shows it’s willing by stopping the settlement-building. The need for negotiations is not an argument against UN membership. On the contrary, it supports the case. Membership would put on the record that one member state occupies another. (Nearly 130 governments already recognize the state of Palestine, including nine on the Security Council.)

Obama is in an embarrassing position. For political reasons, he must support Israel by vetoing the membership resolution. But in light of the Arab Spring, the awkwardness of that position is palpable. So he is working overtime to avert the need for a veto. The administration will try to delay action to avoid the vote. If that doesn’t work, it is bribing and threatening other governments to vote No. Short of nine votes for the resolution, Obama would not have to cast the veto.

But if all moves fail, he will order the veto. The world will then have no doubt where he stands: with the occupier, against the conquered. It will be another shameful day for America.