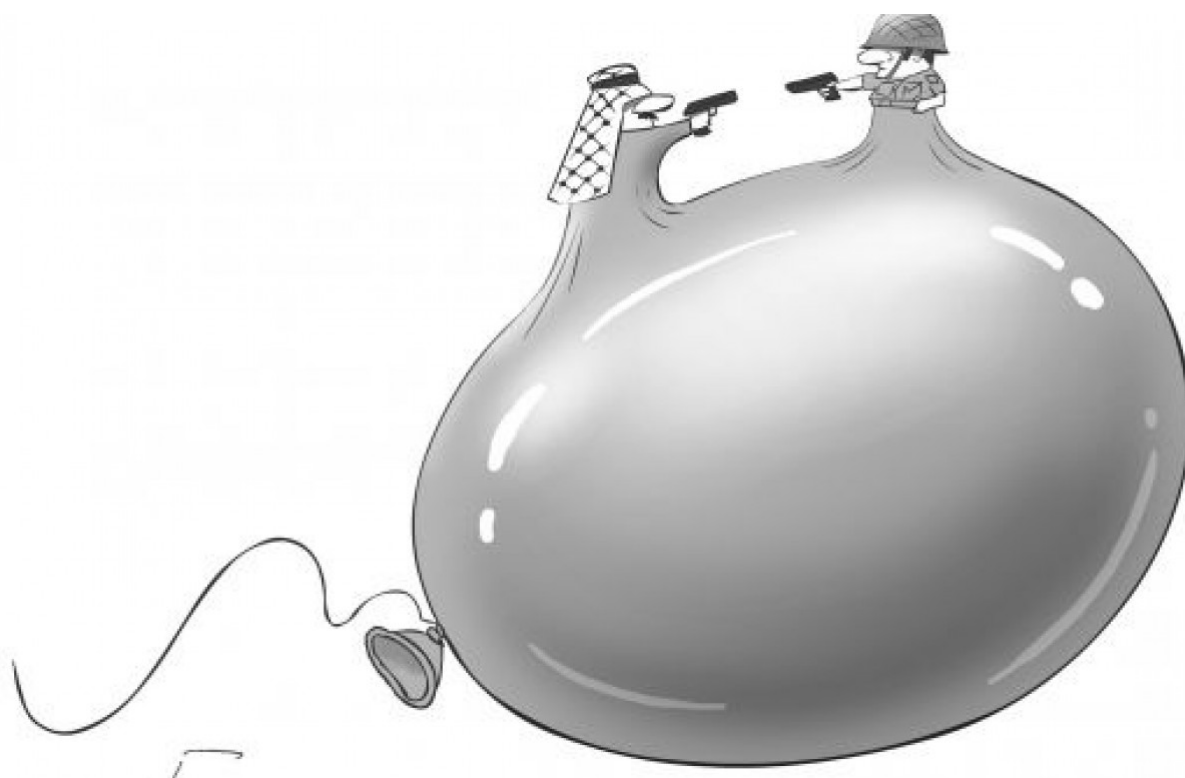


Russia Must Show Leadership in Palestinian Vote

By [David Harris](#)

September 13, 2011



The opening of the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 21 will focus on Israeli-Palestinian relations. Yet the gathering also offers an opportunity for Russia to reinforce its role as an international leader and a responsible player in the search for Arab-Israeli peace.

As the Palestinian leadership turns to the UN to support its unilateral pursuit of statehood, Russia will face a difficult choice between the Palestinian bid and Moscow's calls for a different type of approach. Russia is a member of the diplomatic Quartet on the Middle East — along with the European Union, the UN and the United States — which has advocated direct talks and a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, against counter-productive unilateral moves.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov recently reiterated Moscow's commitment to this approach, telling a news conference: "This is a question of principle, because only negotiations can ensure the creation of a viable and cohesive Palestinian state, a state that, of course, will live in peace and security side by side with Israel and other nations of the region." He was exactly

right.

As a member of the UN Security Council, Russia will likely vote on the Palestinian bid twice: First at the council itself, and then, following an expected veto of the bid by Washington, at the General Assembly.

While the General Assembly cannot admit a new state to the UN, it can give the Palestinians the status of non-member observer state. It can also offer symbolic support, by majority vote, for a Palestinian state along the 1967 lines, with the eastern part of Jerusalem as its capital.

Such a move leads away from, not toward, a two-state solution. Consider this:

First, such an end run to avoid face-to-face talks with Israel can produce no lasting peace, no matter how many resolutions the General Assembly passes. Responsible political leaders should encourage the Palestinians to return to the peace table.

Second, a Palestinian state recognized along the 1967 lines, which are in fact nothing more than the 1949 armistice lines, undermines UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and the Camp David Accords, which call for a negotiated outcome and do not predetermine final boundaries. If the General Assembly endorses a Palestinian state's borders, how, in the real world, will the Palestinians ever climb down from that tree to accept the territorial adjustments diplomats know will be required to address the minimum needs of both sides?

Third, countries that support the Palestinian strategy may well contribute to a resurgence of violence. When Palestinians on the street realize that no UN General Assembly vote can actually produce a state, how long will it take for disappointment to turn into protests and more? And when they grasp, for instance, that annual U.S. aid of about \$500 million may come to a screeching halt, as Congress has already indicated, what then?

Fourth, a state, by definition, controls defined borders. Can Palestinian Authority President Abbas legitimately claim control over the West Bank, where unresolved issues with Israel remain? And Gaza, where he acknowledges a partnership with Hamas and where the governing authority is a terrorist organization that fails to meet any of the three conditions for engagement set by the Quartet? A vote to recognize such a "state" may create a dangerous precedent. Is the General Assembly prepared to validate the statehood of every secessionist, insurgent or so-called independence group, regardless of conditions on the ground? Could this precedent perhaps encourage a delegation of Chechen warlords to take a similar bid for statehood to the UN?

And fifth, a General Assembly vote would send precisely the wrong message to Israel, that the UN will: (a) ignore your vital interests; (b) overlook your determined efforts to reach a negotiated two-state agreement; (c) hand over land that includes Jerusalem's Jewish Quarter and sacred Western Wall to Palestinian control; and (d) reinforce your long-held distrust of the world body, whose automatic majority today will not give Israel a fair hearing.

Of course, the General Assembly majority will support whatever the Palestinians decide to do, since the Arab League (22 members), Organization of the Islamic Conference (56 members) and Non-Aligned Movement (118 members) have sufficient numbers.

Still, the Palestinians dearly covet the endorsement of democratic countries. A few nations, including Canada, Germany, Netherlands, Italy and the United States, have declared their opposition, but, disturbingly, many others are playing their cards close to their chest.

It is true that support for the Palestinians at the UN offers the path of least diplomatic resistance. There are no negative repercussions seen for voting against Israel, but standing with Israel can exert a high price, as Canada discovered last year when it lost its bid for a Security Council seat because it refused to succumb to the anti-Israel herd mentality. And there could also be bilateral consequences in energy, investments and trade for taking a principled stand on such a vote.

We will know soon enough how countries line up.

And then we will have a pretty good sense of which democratic nations have the courage to embrace principle in the pursuit of Israeli-Palestinian peace, and which are ready to throw it to the wind.

David Harris is executive director of the American Jewish Committee.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/09/13/russia-must-show-leadership-in-palestinian-vote-a9520>