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Misdirected Palestinian Rage

A political demonstration keeps Palestinians focused on the wrong issues.

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Palestinians on the West Bank were summoned by their government to attend a “Day of Rage” demonstration last Sunday. What were the demonstrators so angry about? Curiously, the Day of Rage wasn’t directed against the tyrannical regimes currently brutalizing Muslim and Arab protestors in a half dozen Middle East countries. Nor did the Palestinian demonstrators express rage over the fact that they don’t yet have an independent state of their own. Rather, it seems that Palestinian leaders are angry because the Obama administration dared to vote against a United Nations Security Council resolution declaring that Israel’s settlements on the West Bank are “illegal.” U.S. leaders “are liars who pretend to support democracy and peace,” said Al Fatah official and former Palestinian intelligence chief Tawfik Tirawi, in calling for the demonstration. Here in a nutshell is everything that is wrong with the Obama administration’s approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict and the so-called “peace process.” When Obama arrived in office in January 2009, he was aware that just four months earlier Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert had offered Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas an independent state on a silver platter. With land swaps from Israel, the Palestinians would have received the equivalent of all the territory the Arabs controlled before the 1967 war, and they could have built their capital in East Jerusalem. Only one significant concession was demanded of President Abbas in return—a declaration that the Palestinians were giving up the “right of return” to Israel for the refugees from the 1948 war and their millions of descendants. But Abbas rejected Olmert’s generous proposal without the courtesy of an explanation or even a counteroffer—just as Abbas’s predecessor, Yasser Arafat, walked away from a similar deal [proffered](#) by President Clinton at Camp David at the end of 2000.

I suppose it represents some degree of progress that—unlike Arafat in 2000—Abbas didn’t respond to the 2008 Israeli peace offer by launching a violent intifada against Israel’s civilian population. Instead he went on the political offensive, trying to shift the conversation from the Palestinian refusal to compromise on the “right of return” to the

alleged “threat to peace” of continued Israeli construction activity inside the existing West Bank settlements. Abbas’s diplomacy found a willing partner in the new American president, who was already offering apologies to the Arab world for America’s purported sins in an effort to prove that he was no George W. Bush. Obama then pressured the new Israeli government, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, to accept a one-year moratorium on all new settlement construction—even forbidding the addition of a single bedroom to existing family homes. This unilateral Israeli concession would supposedly entice Abbas to resume the direct negotiations that he had abruptly broken off in September 2008. But Obama’s gambit didn’t work. Abbas didn’t return to the bargaining table until there was just one month left on the construction moratorium. As time ran out, the negotiations were aborted once again.

With some Western observers finally beginning to see through Abbas’s con, the Palestinian president then launched a new PR campaign to prove that it was Netanyahu, not himself, who was intransigent. In several public commentaries he suddenly remembered that he and Prime Minister Olmert had been tantalizingly close to an overall peace agreement back in September 2008. The only reason that progress toward peace was blocked, Abbas now claimed, was that Olmert became distracted by his legal problems and the beginning of the Gaza War in December 2008. As I recently [pointed out](#), reporters for the *New York Times* willingly served as Abbas’s “useful idiots” in rewriting the history of the Olmert-Abbas negotiations. In a front-page news story, plus a ballyhooed cover story in the paper’s Sunday magazine, the *Times* absolved Abbas of any responsibility for the breakup of the September 2008 talks with Olmert. Going even further than usual into the realm of political advocacy, the *Times* [story](#), written by Bernard Avishai, also suggested that the small differences between the parties could be quickly resolved if the Obama administration would reengage in the peace process. But within days of the *Times* magazine story, Abbas proved definitively how disinterested he really was in picking up the negotiations from 2008. The Palestinian leadership pushed hard for passage of a UN Security Council resolution declaring that the Israeli West Bank settlements were illegal. With the Middle East in an uproar from Tunis to Tripoli, President Obama was forced to call Abbas and plead with the Palestinian leader to accept a milder, nonbinding resolution that would retain the condemnation of Israel’s continued settlement activity. But Abbas nevertheless pushed ahead, knowing that the

stronger resolution would put Obama between the proverbial rock and a hard place. In doing so, the Palestinian leader made it almost impossible for the American administration to serve as an honest broker and bring the parties together around the parameters of the stalled Olmert-Abbas negotiations.

This is exactly what Abbas intended when he forced the Security Council to vote on the resolution calling the Israeli settlements illegal. The Palestinians would rather rage against the settlements than negotiate a land swap that would give them a state and make the settlement issue irrelevant. The reason for that intransigence is now clearer than ever. There is yet no Palestinian leader with the courage and vision to declare to the residents of the refugee camps that their 60-year-old dream of returning to their former homes in Israel is—and always was—a mirage. Until the Obama administration recognizes that truth and tells it to the Palestinians, its diplomatic approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict will remain as feckless as it is fruitless.