



# MEDIA CALL: PALESTINE AND THE U.N.

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**WELCOME/MODERATOR:**

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**SPEAKER:**

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TOM CARVER: OK. Well, good morning, everyone. This is Tom Carver, vice president of communications at the Carnegie Endowment. And this is a media conference call with Marwan Muasher, the vice president for studies here, who runs our Middle East program.

Marwan is of course the former foreign minister and deputy prime minister for Jordan and played a central role in developing the Arab Peace Initiative and the Middle East Road Map. And we're talking today about the busy week at the U.N., Obama's speech on Wednesday and the Palestinian maneuvers to get full membership of a Palestinian state, which is expected on Friday before the U.N. Security Council.

So this is going to last half an hour. It's on the record. And please feel free, at any stage, to jump in with questions. That's the whole point. Marwan is here to answer your questions. So why don't I just start by asking you, Marwan, maybe about the president's speech tomorrow. What do you think – what sort of approach is he going to take towards the Middle East peace process and the Palestinian request for statehood?

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MARWAN MUASHER: Well, the president will once again emphasize the need for bilateral negotiations as the only way to achieve that statehood. But frankly, you know, the U.S. has basically taken a position that it will wait until after the U.S. presidential elections before they pick up on the issue in any serious way.

I think the president is going to face a challenge in convincing an Arab world that the United States is on the side of freedom when it comes to, you know, Egypt, Syria, Libya and others, but on the Palestinian issue it is going to adopt a different position. And that is going to be a difficult act to argue in his speech tomorrow.

MR. CARVER: And there's no question in your mind that he is – that the Americans will veto it if it comes before the Security Council?

MR. MUASHER: If it goes to the Security Council, as it appears likely, and if the U.S. – if there are nine votes in favor of full membership, then the U.S. will definitely veto that. I think what the strategy is now is that the U.S. is trying to convince some members of the council to vote against this measure so that it does not have to cast a veto.

Casting a veto is going to be very problematic, as I said, in the Arab world: One, because the president himself has sort of raised expectations last year by hoping that by this time, there would be a Palestinian state that would be admitted to the United Nations; and two, because in the context of the Arab Spring and what is going on in the region, the president will have to explain why the Palestinians do not deserve sort of the same kind of treatment or support that other Arab countries are getting.

MR. CARVER: And of course, he's going to be meeting with the head of the Libyan Transitional Council, which will underline what you just said, right? That he's giving a lot of support to other aspirant nations in the Arab world.

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MR. MUASHER: Yes. And he will have also statements of support in his own speech. As far as I know, there's no scheduled meeting with President Mahmoud Abbas, so you know, that's another thing to look at.

MR. CARVER: And what are the Palestinians doing this week? I mean, beyond the Security Council, are they also going to try to put this before the General Assembly as well?

MR. MUASHER: Well, first, I think we should read this as an act of frustration, on behalf of the Palestinians, with a U.S. administration that has not really moved the peace process forward in any significant way, but also a frustration with the lack of progress on the peace process in general because of what they see as also an Israeli government that is not prepared to seriously engage in, you know, arriving at an acceptable solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

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What the Palestinians will do, as they have said, is that, you know, they seem keen on pushing full force with the Security Council. If that effort fails, then I would expect them to go to the General Assembly – of course, not with the same resolution, because that is going to require approval by the Security Council.

They will go with a different request to the General Assembly that will only need a simple majority of votes to elevate their status to, sort of, an observer state. That will allow them to be admitted into such U.N. organizations as the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice, UNESCO and others. And it would sort of serve as a moral victory, but would not admit them to the United Nations as a full member.

MR. CARVER: And you were once Jordan's ambassador to Israel. I mean, where do you think the Israelis will take this? How is Netanyahu likely to react even to a failed vote at the Security Council?

MR. MUASHER: Well, we have to divide, you know, the Israeli reaction. The Israeli government's reaction is going to be extremely defensive. The government has already warned of grave consequences if the Palestinians take this to the United Nations.

There are others within the government, you know, within the Israeli political establishment – Tzipi Livni, the opposition leader, has said that this is not a wise strategy and that there must be a quick resolution to the conflict. The security establishment in Israel is arguing that indeed, Israel cannot go on with such a strategy that has alienated Turkey, that has alienated Egypt, that has alienated the Palestinians themselves and that has not won them any friends in the region.

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But certainly, we can expect a rather, you know, harsh reaction by the Israeli government in reaction to the vote.

MR. CARVER: OK. Let's just pause there, see if anyone has any questions for Marwan.

MS. : If the operator's ready to ask questions, to get the questions lined up –

OPERATOR: (Gives queuing instructions.) We'll pause for just a moment to compile the Q&A roster.

MR. CARVER: OK.

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OPERATOR: There are no questions at this time.

[00:7:23]

MR. CARVER: Let's just broaden it out, Marwan, to the kind of peace process in general. I mean, is this the – are we seeing the death throes, do you think, of the Oslo peace accord and peace process?

MR. MUASHER: Well, I think, one, if we look at the number of – sort of questions that are being asked around this town as to the dangers of going to the U.N. one question is, is this going to disrupt the peace process and negotiations? The Palestinians' response to this is that there are no negotiations to start and that the negotiations process has been stagnant for a very long time. So in their point of view, they don't have much to lose from doing this.

The other question that people are asking is that this is a unilateral move by the Palestinians that is not helpful to the peace process. And again, here the Palestinians' point of view is that there are many unilateral moves taken by Israel that have not solicited this reaction – settlement activity is the most important of these unilateral moves that really is, you know, directly against the prospects of a two-state solution – and that what they are doing is not really interfering in any negotiations process, should that negotiation process proceed – that they're not doing this as a replacement of any negotiations process but in parallel of it in order to basically gain statehood, and at least in legal terms, if not in actual terms, preserve a Palestinian state on the basis of the '67 borders – a state that they feel is being literally sort of swallowed by the day through continued settlement activity.

MR. CARVER: So the state that they are seeking has the borders of – the '67 borders, doesn't it?

MR. MUASHER: Yes, they are seeking a state on the basis of '67. That does not mean every single sort of inch of '67. That is going to be still subject to negotiations between themselves and Israel.

In other words, recognition of the state, or admitting a state – which is not going to happen, but suppose it does – to the United Nations does not mean that the negotiations process will stop. It will still require the Palestinians and the Israelis to negotiate the borders of that state. But in that case it will be negotiations between two states, one occupying the other, not between a sort of Israeli state and a Palestinian entity.

MR. CARVER: And does that have any practical implications for the way the peace process discussions are conducted?

[00:10:25]

MR. MUASHER: In practical terms, were the Palestinians to get either an elevated status or full membership in the United Nations, then they will have – they will be able to take Israel, you know, to such places as the International Criminal Court, will be able to – not stop, but at least challenge settlement activity using the Geneva Conventions and others. They will be able to do things as a state rather than as an entity.

In, of course, actual terms, they will still be under occupation and that is not going to change. What in my view is the important thing to watch is the day after.

In other words, whether the Palestinians are admitted or not – my prediction, of course, is that they will get elevated status in the General Assembly – but my view is that if this is followed by sort of large-scale demonstrations in the

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West Bank, out of frustration, and if these demonstrations are to be kept peaceful, even when Israel might retaliate militarily or violently, if the Palestinians are able to do that, in my view that can act as a potential game-changer.

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That would force everyone – the United States, the international community, Israel, everybody – to revisit this issue and not wait until after the U.S. presidential elections. That, in my view, might be a positive outcome regarding the peace process. But in actual terms, other than that, of course it will be seen maybe as a moral victory, but not more.

MR. CARVER: And do you see this – what is going to happen this week in the U.N. – do you see that triggering a greater intervention by the region, by the Arab states as a whole, to try to push for some sort of regional solution?

MR. MUASHER: Well, first, let me say that it is not clear that everything will happen this week. In fact, the Palestinians will submit their request on Friday, so nothing will happen this week. Then it is up to the secretary-general to take it to the Security Council. He can choose to delay that process, although indications are that he won't. But so we are looking at a process that might actually take weeks rather than days.

MR. CARVER: Yeah, but my question was just about the regional response. I mean, do you think that this will provoke the Arabs?

MR. MUASHER: Well, a security – if the U.S. vetoes such a resolution in the Security Council, then I would expect, yes, that there will be large demonstrations, again, around Arab capitals in the context of the Arab Spring. Now, in terms of what the countries will do, you know, countries that are sort of central to the peace process, like Syria, for example, are now bogged down in their own internal struggles. So they're not going to be able to do much about it.

There is an Arab Peace Initiative that has been on the table since 2002 that promises full normalization and security guarantees for Israel by all Arab states. That has been – that has not been activated since 2002, but has not been withdrawn from the table.

This situation is going to be – we're going to see a region in turmoil, I think, whatever happens at the United Nations. It is going to trigger a period of unrest. My own hope is that if this happens, that it remains peaceful. Because if it does not, I think that the Palestinians will lose a lot of support which they have today from the international community – if they turn this unrest into any violent demonstrations.

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MR. CARVER: But it's possible, isn't it, that an American veto could have ramifications beyond the Palestinian issue. I mean, we saw that very trenchant op-ed by Prince Turki saying the Saudis will be very disappointed in the U.S.

MR. MUASHER: It is very possible. The United States – and not just possible, it's highly likely. The United States today, you know, does not enjoy a great deal of credibility in the Arab world.

President Obama, when he came to Egypt at the start of his presidency, sort of raised expectations that the United States is going to deal differently with the Arab world, from a position of cooperation and collaboration rather than from a position of, you know, acting as a Big Brother. But that has not been translated in actual terms in the peace process, which has not witnessed any serious progress since the Obama administration came to power.

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But in the context of the Arab Spring – and that is the important new development – when the United States itself is trying to regain part, at least, of its credibility in the region by standing on the side of those who are yearning for change and freedom – that sort of strategy is going to be hurt tremendously by a U.S. veto that will be seen by the region as, once again, a double-standard policy of selectively standing by certain people in the region yearning for freedom but not others.

[00:16:28]

MR. CARVER: OK. Moderator, could we just see if there are any questions wanting to be asked?

OPERATOR: Certainly. As a reminder, if you would like to ask a question, press “star” and the number one on your telephone keypad. We have a question from the line of Felice Friedson.

MR. CARVER: Please go ahead.

Q: Hi, Marwan? I have two questions. The first one is, why do we not see the Palestinians more concerned about where aid will come from, and who will foot the bill for the Palestinians the day after the vote?

And the second question is more in terms of having the negotiations continue, which they need Israel to come to the table – because when it comes to electricity and water and these issues, they must negotiate with the Israelis. If they piss them off literally, how will they be able to go back and negotiate?

[00:17:23]

MR. MUASHER: Well, two very important questions. Indeed, Arab states, I think, have not lived up to their expectations, have not been giving the Palestinians aid or at least the levels of aid that they have promised in the past. Saudi Arabia yesterday gave them \$200 million, but it’s still not clear where the rest of the money will come from.

Certainly, you know, any cutoff of U.S. aid is going to hurt the Palestinians tremendously. I think there’s a feeling in the Palestinian Authority that the whole project of the state is falling apart anyway and that, you know, if the state is not there, there is not much point aiding it, I presume.

To the second part of the question, this is one of the problems – is that there is no negotiation process, whether on water, whether on any of the issues that need to be finalized. And there is sort of a feeling that the present Israeli government is not serious about any negotiations process that might lead to an acceptable solution for the Palestinians.

The administration tried, through Dennis Ross and David Hale, to convince the Palestinians to agree to a negotiations period of one year, during which they would agree on all final status, and a quartet statement that would once again uphold the principles that President Obama made in his May speech – but could not also get either the Israeli government or the Palestinians themselves to agree on the content of that statement. And after that effort failed, the Palestinians decided that they had no other sort of course of action but to push ahead at the U.N.

Q: Can you hear me at the moment?

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MR. MUASHER: Yes.

Q: OK. In 2010, the Israelis did freeze settlements, so why didn't the Palestinians come forward and try to negotiate at that time?

MR. MUASHER: The Israelis did not freeze settlement activity permanently. They froze settlement activity for a limited period. The two sides did go back to negotiations after a period of nine months, and then once the Israelis made it clear they were not going to renew settlement activity beyond that, the negotiations fell apart again.

I cannot underscore enough the importance of this particular issue – you know, continuation of settlement activity – to the prospects of a two-state solution. You have today 500,000 settlers-plus in the West Bank and Gaza – sorry, in the West Bank and Jerusalem. And even if you annex all of the settlements on the Green Line surrounding Jerusalem to Israel, you're still left with 100,000 settlers in the West Bank that will have to be evacuated in any eventual settlement.

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Any increase in that number, which itself is formidable, is going to place the prospects of a two-state solution as very, very dim. And in my own view, settlement activity should stop – as per the road map, as per Senator Mitchell's original report in 2001 – if we are indeed to seriously arrive at a solution that would meet the needs of both communities.

MR. CARVER: OK. Are there any other questions?

OPERATOR: We have a question..

MR. CARVER: Please go ahead.

Q: Hi. And I'm sorry, I missed the first five minutes of the call, so I missed whatever your points were right at the top. But I'm wondering – you know, there's a lot of diplomacy going on in New York right now, and I'm wondering whether you think there's still any way for this – any way for the Americans, or anyone else for that matter, to talk the Palestinians out of going to the Security Council, let's say?

[00:22:12]

MR. MUASHER: I think that U.S. diplomacy probably has failed. They tried to do that with the two trips by Dennis Ross and David Hale to the region. They did not succeed in getting the Palestinians to, you know, stop this effort. What is going on now probably is more along the lines of EU diplomacy.

What the European Union is trying to do is to convince the Palestinians to drop their bid at the Security Council, to go instead to the General Assembly to ask only for an elevated status, and to do that in the context of a resolution that can be negotiated with the EU, where at least a majority of European countries would find it acceptable to vote for that resolution.

These efforts are still going on. I think we will not know until the eleventh hour. Abu Mazen said that he will place the request on Friday, so I don't think we will know before Thursday night whether the EU will be successful at doing so or not.

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Whether the EU, again, is talking to the Americans about this or not is not clear. Even if they are, I would guess that the Americans don't want such talks to be known for domestic reasons because, you know, Congress is dead against any effort to go to the United Nations, whether to the Security Council or to the General Assembly. And we won't know until Thursday night or Friday morning whether that effort is successful or not.

[00:24:00]

OPERATOR: We have a question

Q: Yeah, Marwan. I appreciate you doing this. The president meets today with Erdogan from Turkey. There was a rather intense diplomatic attempt to try to, you know, solve the rift between Turkish-Israeli relations in the run-up to this, and that failed too. And I'm just curious why you think that was and whether – what it sort of foretells about U.S. diplomacy in the region, as so many of these key countries, like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and others just line up against us on the Palestinian statehood issue.

MR. MUASHER: Well, you know that Turkey and Israel have enjoyed strong relations for a very long time and under different administrations, whether it was Likud or Labor. This flotilla incident, among other, also, reasons – you know, Erdogan is also following a very populist strategy when it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict – has meant that – you know, coupled with the refusal of Israel to apologize for the flotilla incident – has made things worse.

And I don't think that, you know, the Turkish prime minister is under any mood to reverse course just because of a conversation with the U.S. president. There is a new mood in the region that has become, you know, that has come about because of the Arab context – a mood that is going to, I think, be taken more seriously by the U.S. administration. This is not the Arab world, for better or worse, that existed prior to January.

And when it comes to the Israeli occupation, you are seeing clearly a very defiant, a very angry Arab world, which feels that the Israeli occupation has gone for far too long and that there needs to – you know, that the occupation needs to end, basically. So I don't expect the meeting between the president and Mr. Erdogan to result in any softening of the Turkish position.

OPERATOR: We have no further questions at this time.

[00:26:19]

MR. CARVER: OK, well, we're nearly up on the half-hour. Is there anything else, Marwan, you just wanted to say?

MR. MUASHER: No. That's all, thank you very much.

MR. CARVER: So thank you for joining. We will no doubt schedule one in the near future as events continue to unfold. But thank you all, and thank you, Marwan.

MS. : And we will have a transcript of this call up on our website within 24 hours. So if you didn't catch something, you can always check there.

MR. CARVER: OK, thank you.

MR. MUASHER: Thank you.

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