

Should the government decide to abstain from the UN vote on Palestinian statehood, it will serve to perpetuate a moribund peace process and further marginalise the UK in Middle Eastern affairs.

As the Palestinian bid for statehood at the UN looms closer, Britain remains non-committal and hints that it will abstain from the Security Council vote. Claims that such a move will encourage both sides back to the negotiating table are false, writes [Guy Burton](#), and are indicative of political beliefs that favour a relationship with the US over that with the nations of the Middle East.



This week a proposal to make Palestine the world's newest state will be put before the UN. For the Palestinian bid to succeed, it must receive a positive recommendation from the UN Security Council (UNSC) followed by admission on behalf of the UN General Assembly (UNGA). At present, it looks likely that the US will side with Israel and veto the proposal, which would set the UNSC on a collision course with the UNGA, which is expected to offer overwhelming support for a Palestinian state and leave Washington isolated in the court of global public opinion. It is therefore unsurprising that the Obama administration has been putting pressure on other members of the UNSC, including those with permanent status like Britain (who also possesses a veto), not to support the Palestinian effort.

Britain's Palestinian position

Britain's position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in line with that of the international community at large. Successive governments have repeated the mantra of a peace process based on direct negotiations, leading to two states and Jerusalem as the capital of both, a resolution to the refugee problem and the two states' borders being drawn on the 1967 borders (through equivalent land swaps). These principles are broadly shared across the British political divide, even if there are some slight differences between the political parties.

The most recent official statements made by the government have maintained this stance. At the last UNSC debate on the Middle East situation in July, the British representative, Sir Mark Lyall Grant, reiterated the government's support for bilateral negotiations to resolve the conflict. To ensure this – and to prevent any deterioration of trust – he said three conditions needed to be satisfied: a halt to settlement construction by Israel; greater Israeli security through continued coordination between the two sides and an end to rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip along with improved access into Gaza, so as to reduce hatred, radicalism and violence.

British disconnection and the reasons behind it

Yet contrary to what British ministers and officials may think, their statements do not correlate to facts on the ground. First, the appeal to both sides to return to the negotiating table presumes that Israel and the Palestinians are equals. Nothing could be further from the truth, given the power asymmetry that exists between a more powerful Israel and the weaker Palestinians whose territory is either occupied such as the West Bank or besieged as in Gaza. Moreover, this imbalance has contributed to a sense among many Palestinians that the Oslo peace process is effectively at an end. Since 1993 Israel and the Palestinians have been involved in on-off talks, during which time the Israeli occupation has not only continued, but deepened, as shown by the doubling of Israeli settlements in the West Bank over the past 10 years.

Second, the emphasis on Israeli security disregards that of Palestinian security, especially those communities at risk from Israeli army actions and settler provocations in the occupied Palestinian territory (OPT). Third, the condemnation of rocket attacks from Gaza fails to take into account the internal political position within the OPT and in Gaza. On the one hand, the push for Palestinian statehood is being led by the Western donors' client, the nationalist Fatah faction, which controls the West Bank. The donors' nemesis, the Islamist Hamas, controls Gaza and has been largely silent on the statehood bid. In addition, responsibility for the Gaza rocket attacks come from splinter Islamist groups, which Hamas is trying to reign in. Fourth, many Palestinians would argue that it is Israel's siege rather than Palestinian hatred, which has contributed to the spiral of violence from Gaza.

The reason for British misrepresentation of local realities reflects its general approach to politics in the

Middle East. For Rosemary Hollis, author of *[Britain and the Middle East in the 9/11 Era](#)*, British policy has been less concerned with regional issues and more with the global dimension, including relations with the region's only superpower: the US. Over the past decade the Blair government remained close to the US so as to maximise leverage. This prompted the UK to be an active participant in the Afghan and Iraq conflicts.

Where next for Britain?

However, Britain's status in the region and the peace process is much diminished. Despite being the Palestinians' eighth largest donor (contributing \$82million in bilateral aid) in 2008-09, Britain suffers from a lack of credibility in the region. Blair's close association with the US and Israel – including his refusal to condemn Israel's war in Lebanon in 2006 or make the Bush administration adopt a more pro-active role in the peace process – meant that his appointment as the UN's peace envoy was treated with considerable scepticism on the Palestinian, and Arab, street.

Similar scepticism may be felt in relation to the current coalition government's Middle East policy, in the wake of the current Arab spring. Contrary to what British ministers and officials may publically believe, Arab public opinion was not as supportive of NATO's military intervention (including Britain's role) in Libya. Public sentiment suspects baser motives were at work among the NATO countries, principally to secure the Libyan oil fields and ensure Gaddafi's removal in favour of a more pliant regime. Moreover, NATO's action in oil-rich Libya is contrasted to its absence in similarly repressive, but non-oil producing Syria.

Given this context, Britain's non-committal position towards the Palestinian proposal is unlikely to improve its standing, especially given the foreign secretary William Hague's discouraging remarks that the bid could lead to confrontation if it is vetoed. To date, no announcement has yet been made over how Britain intends to vote, which Hague has tried to turn into a virtue: he claims that Britain's silence, along with other European countries, may help pressure both sides back to the negotiating table.

In conclusion, Britain's rhetoric only emphasises their primary concern with the wider global context rather than the local issues at stake in the OPT. The US wants to avoid being isolated and is encouraging other UNSC members either to vote against the Palestinian bid or abstain. Britain is caught up in that process and, at the same time, Hague's recommendation to return to negotiations offers no solution and only a continuation of the status quo. Ultimately, these manoeuvrings over how Britain eventually votes will only serve to illustrate the extent to which London remains a largely marginalised actor in the peace process.