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[Home](#) / [news](#) / [opinion](#) /

Motro: Let Palestinians write their own destiny

By SHARI MOTRO

Palestinians are poised to bring their quest for statehood to the United Nations this week. If they follow through, the Obama administration intends to veto it. This would be a mistake.

I am an Israeli-American, and I campaigned and voted for Barack Obama because I thought that Bush and McCain's brand of support for Israel was destroying it. I believed that Obama's vision, his words and his past gave us something to be hopeful about. In particular, I was swept up by a speech he gave in Philadelphia in the spring of 2008, a speech about race.

Referring to historic and ongoing disparities between whites and blacks in this country, Obama listed injustices that also plague Palestinians in Israel and in the occupied territories: Segregated schools. Legalized discrimination in housing. A lack of economic opportunity and basic services that helps create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect.

"I have asserted a firm conviction," he said, "that, working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds For the African-American community, that ... means ... teaching [our children] that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny."

You could say that in the late '90s and early 2000s, as the Oslo peace process crumbled, Palestinians and Israelis alike "succumb[ed] to despair or cynicism." But increasingly, activists in Israel and in Palestine have been turning away from hopelessness and away from violence. They are standing in front of bulldozers to protect ancestral olive groves. They are boycotting companies that rely on and perpetuate the occupation. They are publishing testimonies that might jeopardize their personal safety in the hope that truth will help justice prevail. Palestinians' appeal to the U.N. is one example of this turn toward non-violent forms of resistance. It represents a belief that Palestinians too can "write their own destiny."

Because I voted — joyfully and proudly — for the man who spoke these words, because they meant something to me, it's hard not to succumb to despair and cynicism over his administration's plan to veto Palestinian statehood. It's hard to accept that the America I elected Obama to lead will stand in the way of an

occupied, stateless people exercising their right to self-determination.

Admittedly, many of Obama's statements and policies seem designed to reassure Israel's hawks, people who draw a zero-sum conclusion from Jewish history. But the spirit of his larger project points in a different direction; it points toward an approach that recognizes that pro-Israel is pro-peace and pro-peace is pro-Palestine. Dignity for Palestinians is not just a prerequisite for Israel's survival, it is compelled by Judaism and by America's most sacred ideals.

I am not arguing that a declaration of independence at this particular juncture is necessarily the best way to advance the cause of Palestinian self-determination. Palestinians themselves are divided on this question. My point is that it is their choice. It's not for us to decide. We Americans shouldn't decide. Let this be a Palestinian conversation; let Palestinians write their own destiny.

Palestinians want their freedom. They have waited many, many years — years during which various peace processes were in progress. They've waited too long.

If America frustrates their effort, what does that say about what we stand for?

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