The Upside-Down Policy on Israel

Despite the collapse of Israeli-Palestinian peace prospects, the Obama administration continues the fiction that any Palestinian appeal to the UN somehow threatens those non-existent talks, while Republicans vow to sync U.S. policies even more in line with Israeli demands, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

George Orwell, who imagined a Ministry of Truth that dispensed untruths, and Charles Dodgson, who as Lewis Carroll had Humpty Dumpty making words mean whatever he wanted them to mean, would appreciate how some concepts routinely get flipped and stood on their head in much of what is said about the unending Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

One of the recurring examples was in full display this week as the United Nations Security Council failed to pass a pro-peace-agreement resolution. It seems that only in this conflict can involving the United Nations, the most multilateral forum on the planet, be routinely denounced as “unilateral.” This latest effort at UN involvement failed, while actual unilateral moves on the ground, which make a peace agreement ever more difficult, continue.

Routine abuse of other concepts in talking about this conflict also were evident at the Council this week, including in the statement made by U.S. Ambassador Samantha Power while voting against the resolution. Power said her government opposed the resolution because peace “will come from hard choices and compromises that must be made at the negotiating table” and because hardships and threats associated with the conflict “will not subside until the parties reach a comprehensive settlement achieved through negotiations.”

This continues the canard that a multilateral resolution of this sort is somehow a substitute for, or an attempt to circumvent, bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians when in fact it is nothing of the sort. The draft resolution repeatedly, and either explicitly or implicitly, recognizes that any agreement will have to emerge from such negotiations. A central operative paragraph is an exhortation to the parties “to act together in the pursuit of peace by negotiating in good faith.”

The resolution does get into some of the substance of what is to be considered an acceptable resolution of the conflict, but only in ways that already are broadly recognized by the international community, and for the most part explicitly by the United States, as necessary parts of any agreement that ever could be reached and would stick. Some principles are laid out, but specific

hard choices and compromises will still have to be made at the negotiating table.

The resolution states, for example, that the boundaries of the Israeli and Palestinian states should be based on the June 1967 borders with “mutually agreed” and “equivalent” land swaps; exactly what those swaps will be must come out of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The resolution calls for “a just and agreed solution to the Palestine refugee question” but does not presuppose what that solution should be.

Another commonly abused concept is “balance.” Power’s statement asserted that the resolution is “deeply unbalanced” and “addresses the concerns of only one side.” In fact, the resolution is centered on the objective of “two independent, democratic and prosperous states, Israel and a sovereign, contiguous and viable State of Palestine.”

It calls for security arrangements “that ensure the security of both Israel and Palestine through effective border security and by preventing the resurgence of terrorism.” It declares that a final status agreement shall put “an end to all claims and lead to immediate mutual recognition”; references in the resolution to the Arab League peace initiative lead to the clear conclusion that mutual recognition would include recognition of Israel not only by Palestine but by the other Arab states.

The resolution is about as balanced as it can be in the face of a highly unbalanced situation. An unhelpful fiction plaguing discussion of this issue is that the conflict is symmetric when in fact it is highly asymmetric. The fundamental asymmetry today is that one side is the occupier and the other side consists of those who are occupied.

The occupier could, if it chose, make it possible for a Palestinian state to be established this year. Those who are occupied have no such power. The most peaceful and respectable thing they can do, in addition to negotiating in good faith at a bilateral negotiating table, is to plead their case at the United Nations.

The United States (and, of course, Israel) lobbied hard against the resolution, being particularly assiduous in twisting the arm of the Nigerian president. The pressure succeeded in getting enough abstentions (in addition to a “no” vote from Australia) that the resolution failed to get the nine affirmative votes needed for passage, even though it did get a majority.

Thus the Obama administration can say that it was not the U.S. veto that prevented adoption of the resolution. But make no mistake: this pro-peace

resolution failed because the United States, once again, did the bidding of the Israeli government and opposed it.

On the basis of what the resolution says, and of what the United States has repeatedly said it favors regarding an Israeli-Palestinian peace, the opposition made no sense. It might make sense if it is part of a calculated management of the balance sheet of favors and influence that tends to be involved in the Israel lobby's interaction with the U.S. Congress.

Maintaining this kind of "pro-Israel" (actually, pro-Likud) position at the UN might make it slightly easier for the administration to ward off Congressional trouble-making on, in particular, a nuclear agreement with Iran. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, issued a reminder of the potential for such trouble when he declared the other day that the Republican-controlled Congress, rather than exercising independent judgment about what is in U.S. interests regarding policy toward Iran, will instead "follow" the "lead" of the Israeli prime minister, who endeavors to undermine U.S. diplomacy on the subject.

Now Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority, in the wake of the Palestinians' setback at the Security Council, is moving to have the PA join additional international treaties and organizations, including the International Criminal Court. This is generating the usual protests from the Israeli government, and thus from the U.S. government.

The Palestinian action is described as another supposedly destructive "unilateral" move, or as members of the Israeli government have put it, "aggressively unilateral." Amid such reactions, and what will be the usual forms of punishment, such as Israel withholding tax receipts that are supposed to belong to the Palestinians, one can lose sight of the nature of what the Palestinians are doing by adhering to such international conventions and institutions. They are voluntarily signing on to commitments to observe certain standards of behavior. That seems like just the sort of step that one should hope and expect to see from people who want their own state.

The point is underscored by a threat the Israeli government is voicing in response to the ICC move, *viz*., that if the Palestinians have any ideas about bringing suit in the court against Israel for its conduct during its most recent demolition of Gaza, then Israel will counter with accusations about Palestinian war crimes. Fine.

It would be great to have a thorough airing before an international tribunal of everyone's conduct during that tragic episode (although there are reasons to question whether the ICC would be able and willing to assume that role).

But that would still leave the underlying, unresolved conflict. As long as it is unresolved, there will continue to be, in addition to many other regrettable things, periodic Israeli lawn mowing in Gaza, with more operations like Cast Lead and Protective Edge. This brings us to one of the most trouble-plagued concepts of all, because the concept itself is inherently weird, which concerns the nature and existence of the Palestinian Authority itself.

The PA was established two decades ago as supposedly a means to transition from naked occupation to a Palestinian state. Not only have the scheduled dates for that transition already gone far, far into the past; the PA has occupied a role that has made it more of an impediment to creation of a Palestinian state than the facilitator of one.

With the PA existing as an entity that is supposed to have some state-like qualities but not be a state, Israelis who, like those currently in power in Jerusalem, oppose creation of a Palestinian state are able to have things both ways to keep such a state from ever coming into being.

The PA serves as the Palestinians on the plantation, as distinct from the ones in Gaza who are off the plantation. The notion of the PA as a transition mechanism keeps alive the fiction that the Israeli government really is committed to such a transition. It keeps alive the notion that Palestinians should “earn” statehood by building a state from below, while the occupier imposes conditions on it from above that never really enables it to do that kind of building.

And if the PA gets uppity enough to start behaving like a real state, as it has done at the UN and in signing those international conventions, then it swiftly gets slapped down.

The most effective thing the PA has been permitted to do is to serve as an auxiliary administrator of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. Those who denounce the PA for signing treaties on grounds that it is not a state are right; it is indeed not a state. It is more like a prison trusty.

Khalil Shikaki of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah says of the prospect that Abbas’s ICC move will bring about crippling economic punishment from the United States as well as Israel, “This could indeed be the beginning of the end of the PA. They fully realize that.”

If this happens and the trappings of a false transition are stripped away, and a gussied-up occupation becomes once again a naked occupation, it may turn out to be the most useful thing Abbas has ever done.

Such a development may stir the international pot just enough, and get enough

more Israelis to think hard about the costs and consequences to their nation of continuing the occupation, to save the possibility of, in the words of the failed Security Council resolution, “two independent, democratic and prosperous states, Israel and a sovereign, contiguous and viable State of Palestine.”

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In Defense of a CIA Whistleblower

The mainstream U.S. news media sometimes rallies to the defense of a reporter who is pressured to reveal a source but not so much for the brave whistleblower who is the target of government retaliation. Such is the case for ex-CIA officer Jeffrey Sterling, writes Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

The trial of former CIA officer Jeffrey Sterling, set to begin in mid-January, is shaping up as a major battle in the U.S. government’s siege against whistleblowing. With its use of the Espionage Act to intimidate and prosecute people for leaks in “national security” realms, the Obama administration is determined to keep hiding important facts that the public has a vital right to know.

After fleeting coverage of Sterling’s indictment four years ago, news media have done little to illuminate his case – while occasionally reporting on the refusal of *New York Times* reporter James Risen to testify about whether Sterling was a source for his 2006 book *State of War*.

Risen’s unwavering stand for the confidentiality of sources is admirable. At the same time, Sterling – who faces 10 felony counts that include seven under the Espionage Act – is no less deserving of support.

Revelations from brave whistleblowers are essential for the informed consent of the governed. With its hostilities, President Barack Obama’s Justice Department is waging legalistic war on our democratic rights to know substantially more about government actions than official stories. That’s why the imminent courtroom clash in the case of “United States of America v. Jeffrey Alexander Sterling” is so important.

Sterling is accused of telling Risen about a CIA operation that had provided flawed nuclear weapon blueprints to Iran in 2000. The charges are unproven. But no one disputes that Sterling told Senate Intelligence Committee staffers about the CIA action, dubbed Operation Merlin, which Risen's book later exposed and brought to light as dumb and dangerous. While ostensibly aiming to prevent nuclear proliferation, the CIA risked advancing it.

When he informed staff of the Senate oversight committee about Operation Merlin, Sterling was going through channels to be a whistleblower. Presumably he knew that doing so would anger the CIA hierarchy. A dozen years later, as the government gears up for a courtroom showdown, it's payback time in the security-state corral.

The relentless prosecution of Sterling targets potential whistleblowers with a key implicit message: *Do not reveal any "national security" secrets that make the U.S. government look seriously incompetent, vicious, mendacious or dangerous. Don't even think about it.*

With so much at stake, the new petition "Blowing the Whistle on Government Recklessness Is a Public Service, Not a Crime" has gained more than 30,000 signers in recent weeks, urging the government to drop all charges against Sterling. The initial sponsors include ExposeFacts, the Freedom of the Press Foundation, the Government Accountability Project, *The Nation*, *The Progressive* / Center for Media and Democracy, Reporters Without Borders and RootsAction.org. (A disclaimer: I work for ExposeFacts and RootsAction.)

Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg has concisely summarized the context of the government's efforts in the Sterling prosecution. "Sterling's ordeal comes from a strategy to frighten potential whistleblowers, whether he was the source of this leak or not," Ellsberg said in an interview for an article that journalist Marcy Wheeler and I wrote for *The Nation.*

"The aim is to punish troublemakers with harassment, threats, indictments, years in court and likely prison – even if they've only gone through official channels to register accusations about their superiors and agency. That is, by the way, a practical warning to would-be whistleblowers who would prefer to 'follow the rules.' But in any case, whoever were the actual sources to the press of information about criminal violations of the Fourth Amendment, in the NSA case, or of reckless incompetence, in the CIA case, they did a great public service."

Such a great public service deserves our praise and active support.

Norman Solomon is the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy and the author of *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to*

***Death*. He is a co-founder of RootsAction.org.**

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Robert Parry is a longtime investigative reporter who broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for the Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. He founded Consortiumnews.com in 1995 to create an outlet for well-reported journalism that was being squeezed out of an increasingly trivialized U.S. news media.