

**Obama to meet Palestinian leader amid UN crisis**  
**Reuters**  
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UNITED NATIONS, Sept 21 — US President Barack Obama will meet Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas today to urge him to drop plans to ask the UN Security Council to recognise a Palestinian state despite US and Israeli objections.

President Abbas at a meeting in New York, September 19, 2011. — Reuters pic  
The White House said Obama would meet Abbas at 6pm on the sidelines of this week's UN General Assembly session in New York. Obama is also due to meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu earlier today.

"With both the Israelis and the Palestinians the president will be able to say very directly why we believe action at the United Nations is not the way . . . to achieve a (Palestinian) state," Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes told reporters.

Abbas has promised to present UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon with a membership application on Friday, setting the stage for a Security Council vote that the United States, one of five veto-wielding permanent members, says it will block.

The Obama administration and Israel both say that only direct peace talks can lead to peace with the Palestinians, who in turn say almost two decades of fruitless negotiation has left them no choice but to turn to the United Nations.

The drama over the Palestinian UN bid is playing out as Palestinian, Israeli and US leaders all grapple with the fallout from Arab uprisings that are raising new political tensions across the Middle East.

Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Malki said he thought at least nine of the 15 members of the Security Council would back the Palestinian bid and urged the United States to get out of the way.

"We're working towards it and I think we'll manage it," Malki told reporters. "We hope the United States will revise its position and be on the side of the majority of nations or countries who want to support the Palestinian right to have self determination and independence."

A US veto in the Security Council would still block approval even if most other members agree — something that is far from certain.

But securing the nine votes necessary to claim a Security Council majority would allow the Palestinians to highlight the US veto as an obstacle, increasing the diplomatic risks for Washington.

It would also raise pressure on Israel, which despite its offer of direct peace talks has not made any of the concessions that the Palestinians say would make such talks possible.

Stymied Quartet

Senior diplomats from the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United

Nations — the Quartet of Middle East mediators — are meeting throughout the week but with little sign thus far of a breakthrough.

The Quartet has been trying to put together guidelines for future peace talks for months, so far without result. British Foreign Secretary William Hague acknowledged there had been no progress.

Even if the Palestinians file their Security Council application on Friday, an immediate vote is unlikely. This might allow more time for diplomacy aimed at restarting peace talks, said French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe.

“There’s a procedure for dealing with such requests and it can take a few days or weeks more, which means there is room for other initiatives,” Juppe told Europe 1 radio.

“We hope to find a way of convincing all involved to get back around the negotiating table, and in a serious fashion.”

Highlighting the political minefield Obama faces on the issue, Republican presidential challenger Rick Perry blasted the administration over its Middle East policy, saying US peace efforts had “encouraged the Palestinians to shun direct talks”.

Perry’s comments were a reminder that Obama must prepare for what is shaping up as a tough campaign for re-election in 2012 and cannot afford to alienate Israel’s broad support in Congress and with the American public.

In the West Bank, clashes broke out as Jewish settlers protested against the Palestinian plans — another sign of growing tensions in the territory that some fear could spin dangerously out of control.

Tough choices

Israel says the UN move aims to delegitimise the Jewish state. The Palestinians say their UN bid will open the door to new peace talks among two sovereign equals.

Direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians collapsed a year ago after Israel refused to extend a moratorium on new settlements in areas the Palestinians want for a future state.

Israel has occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip since the 1967 war, and the two sides are divided on borders, the status of Jerusalem, the future of Palestinian refugees and whether Israel should be acknowledged as a Jewish state.

The Palestinians want the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for their future state, with East Jerusalem as their capital.

With a US veto certain at the Security Council, the Palestinians may also ask the UN General Assembly to upgrade them from an “entity” to a “non-member state”. Such a step, they say, would be backed by at least 126 of the assembly’s 193 members and give further legitimacy to their claim.

The Palestinian decision to force a confrontation at the United Nations has cast new doubt over the Obama administration’s effort to harness the “Arab Spring” uprisings to forge a new set of US relationships in the Middle East.

"A US veto . . . 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," said Marwan Muasher, a former Jordanian foreign minister and now vice-president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment. — Reuters

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