

It's Time for the U.N. To Admit Palestine

Who won the Intelligence Squared debate, and how.

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After an hour and a half of trying to soften an increasingly furious—and personal—debate over Palestinian membership in the United Nations on Tuesday, moderator John Donvan gave up and wearily asked his panelists for closing statements. Aaron David Miller started off. “I realize in the last 90 minutes that perhaps one of the most astute things I’ve done, the best decisions I’ve made, was to leave the Arab-Israeli negotiating table,” he quipped.

The audience laughed. Onstage, the rest of the panelists looked pained.

Miller, a former adviser to various secretaries of state on the Middle East State Department and Dore Gold, who formerly represented Israel at the United Nations, argued against the motion, “The U.N. Should Admit Palestine as a Full Member State,” at Tuesday’s *Slate*/Intelligence Squared U.S. debate at NYU’s Skirball Center. Defending the motion were Daniel Levy, an Israeli citizen who had drafted key language for the 2003 Geneva Accord, and Mustafa Barghouthi, the general secretary of the Palestinian National Initiative, a third-party movement in Ramallah devoted to nonviolent activism.

The audience was polled on the motion both before and after the debate. Initially 37 percent supported U.N. admission for an autonomous Palestine, 30 percent were opposed to admission, and 33 percent were undecided. When the audience was polled again after the debate, Barghouthi and Levy had coaxed another 18 percent to their cause, earning a total of 55 percent of the votes. Gold and Miller snagged a few new supporters, but not enough (37 percent of the audience left Skirball convinced that the U.N. should not extend membership to Palestine). Perhaps due to the issue's polarizing power—and to the passionate behavior it elicited from the debaters—only 8 percent of the audience hadn't picked a side when the stage went dark.

Judging by the opening statements, the debate looked to be a contest between Gandhis and Cassandras, with one side trumpeting the Palestinian right to self-determination, pursued under peaceful auspices, and the other invoking the ruin that would come of a unilateral settlement. Levy and Barghouthi maintained that Palestinians were oppressed by Israeli occupation, that the urgency of the situation demanded immediate action, and that nonviolent resistance—in this case, an appeal to the court of international opinion—was the most ethical solution to a stalled peace process. They also claimed to have Israel's best interests at heart. "If we don't have a Palestine, we are saying kaddish, the rites of last prayer, for Israeli democracy," Levy warned. Barghouthi echoed: "Martin Luther King Jr. liberated the United States, not only the African-Americans, from segregation. ... We want to liberate ourselves and the Israelis as well."

Miller and Gold were careful to acknowledge the dignity of the Palestinian cause. But they challenged the notion that pursuing statehood for Palestine through the United Nations would produce a safe, satisfactory peace for any of the parties. A thunderous presence throughout the debate, Gold spoke darkly of Israelis who had died in past terrorist attacks. He framed PLO leader Mahmoud Abbas' petition to the United Nations as an attempt to lock down 1967 borders without making necessary concessions to Israel. Such a step, he advised, would only aggravate violence on the ground.

"Both sides, certainly in our case, have a deep inner conviction in the justice of our cause," he said. "The point is, you've got to cut a deal. You can't walk away."

In his opening remarks, Miller reiterated Gold's admonitory note, at the same time searching for a measure of impartiality. "I speak here not as an Israeli and not as a Palestinian," he said. "I speak, with all its imperfections and contradictions, as an American absorbed in this process for 25 years." Championing the motto "no more illusions," Miller urged the audience not to sacrifice common sense to enchanting buzzwords—"sovereignty," "hope"—though he sympathized with the general yearning for progress.

"U.N. admission in the absence of an agreement between Israelis and Palestinians will not take the Palestinians any closer to the full sovereign state that they deserve," he said.

To the audience's delight, Daniel Levy injected some levity into the conversation, noting at one point that anyone who believed the Palestinians should wait around for the Americans to deliver a solution should "go see *Waiting for Godot*." He also drew applause with his contention that the *realpolitik* argument—dismissing the question of Palestinian admission to the United Nations on the grounds that the United States would veto it—is a cop-out. "If that's the case then I strongly suggest you guys cancel the debate you have planned in March about banning college football," he told Donvan, "because it won't be."

Tensions ran particularly high when Gold confronted Barghouthi about a meeting he'd attended in Cairo with the head of Hamas. Asked how he could espouse nonviolence while reaching out to a terrorist group, Barghouthi responded with a dig at Israel's own bloody record. When Donovan intervened, the Palestinian statesman replied that Hamas had begun to revise its jihadist ideals, which prompted Miller to jump in that such a comment "strained the bounds of credulity."

"Why are you afraid of change?" yelled Barghouthi.

Levy started to make a point about the intransigence of Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who rejected the idea of Palestinian statehood in a conference last week. This prompted Gold to interrupt with a splutter of (justified) outrage: "Daniel Levy! Daniel Levy! Daniel Levy! That's called moral equivalence, Daniel Levy."

"Oh, don't throw moral equivalence at me," snapped the former negotiator.

Emotions cooled somewhat during the question-and-answer period. Elaborating on the practical benefits of Palestinian membership in the U.N., Mustafa Barghouthi revealed that he considered a settlement freeze to be the most desirable outcome of Abbas' petition. Miller countered that admission might actually accelerate settlement activity. At that point, Barghouthi explained that he envisioned the PLO's efforts at the U.N. as part of a larger movement of nonviolent resistance, one that anticipated setbacks and declined to store its aspirations in a single basket.

Whether ominous or inspiring, this suggestion reappeared a few minutes later in Daniel Levy's notion of an amorphous "hope" that would fortify Palestinian spirits for the long haul.

Miller wrote me after the debate that it may have been to his opponents' benefit that they had such romantic paradigms on their side. "The appearance of giving up is far worse than giving in," he said, "even if you're giving in to an idea that in the real world will make Palestinian statehood harder to achieve."

On the other hand, John Donovan conceded that there is a limit to living in the past—to hostaging yourself, for instance, to outdated agreements and other generations' crimes.

None of the debaters seemed to think that U.N. membership for a Palestinian state would solve the vast majority of the problems facing Israelis and Palestinians today. (Even Levy admitted that it could make things worse.) Yet the debate audience concluded that the glimmer of a possibility of a solution just might be worth stirring the pot.