In his September 2010 speech to the United Nations General Assembly, President Obama expressed the hope that, "When we come back here next year, we can have an agreement that can lead to a new member of the United Nations, an independent, sovereign state of Palestine living in peace with Israel."

This month, President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority brings a proposal for Palestinian statehood to the U.N. The United States opposes it and may veto it. What is going on?

Since Israel gained control of the Palestinian territories from Jordan and Egypt during the 1967 Six-Day War, the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians has ricocheted between occupation and self-governance, between military operations and terrorist actions, between peace negotiations and the silence of rejection. All of this has played out against the backdrop of the two peoples' incompatible national aspirations.

Despite its small size, Israel has military superiority over not just the Palestinians but also its Arab neighbors. It has never lost a ground war. This is due to Israel's military readiness and the strategic abilities of its commanders and soldiers. It is also due to large amounts of American monetary assistance.

But there is a battlefield where Israel has rarely won a fight, even with American assistance. That is the United Nations. The Arab and other Third-World nations, sometimes with European countries, often mobilize to censure Israel's occupation and its excesses. The United States has regularly used its veto power to protect Israel from these condemnatory resolutions.

So in the United Nations as well as the Middle East, Israel's closest ally is the United States. Obama's statement last year envisioned a peace settlement negotiated between Israel and the Palestinian Authority that would lead to recognition of Palestinian statehood. Those negotiations never got to first base. Blame adheres to both sides, but it is clear that Israel's refusal to stop building new Israeli housing on Palestinian territory caused Palestinians to leave the bargaining table.

In this context, American opposition to U.N. recognition of Palestinian statehood seems to be a ploy to push Palestinians back into peace negotiations, using statehood as a reward for successful talks.

The problem with this view can be expressed in two words, "Arab Spring." From Tunisia and Egypt to Libya, Syria and Yemen, Arab citizens have rebelled against their dictatorial and oppressive rulers. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Morocco have made limited political and/or economic changes to head off such protests.

Across the Middle East, then, Arabs have been struggling for and often gaining more rights and liberties—except in the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel. The Palestinians have been quiet. Few noticeable protests have occurred. Although a couple of terrorist incidents resulted in deaths, they were minor compared to murderous events in Israel's neighbors of Syria and Egypt. You could even describe the Palestinians as "well behaved."

President Abbas has managed to keep control of his people in part because of his plan to request Palestinian statehood at the U.N. This proposal is his way of having the Palestinians participate in the Arab Spring. It is non-violent. It does not involve scenes of soldiers or thugs shooting at peaceful demonstrators. It is restrained and diplomatic.

What will the future be if the United States vetoes this Palestinian Arab Spring, its reach for statehood? Will this win the hearts and minds of the average citizen on the Arab street?

The obvious answer is no. This highly visible vote carries enormous symbolic weight. A negative vote will tarnish our reputation for decades. Sure, America can make up for it by supporting the governments of the newly emerging democracies. We can give them monetary support. (Can we really? In these difficult economic times?).

But supporting governments is largely invisible. It will do little for our street-credibility among the Middle East's residents. Around the world, we will be known as the tyrant who prevented Palestinian independence. Given Obama's address to the U.N. last year, we will even be seen as duplicitous (that's diplomatic-speak for lying). President George W. Bush argued that America should encourage democracy in the Middle East and inspire its people to practice self-determination. Well, we did and they are. Will America now be seen as helping or hindering what we called for?

Perhaps America can best help Israel by promoting democracy and self-determination everywhere in the Middle East. Wouldn't that be the best road to a stable Middle East in which Israel and the Palestinians can participate as independent democratic nations?