A two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been on life support for two decades of foundering negotiations.

But the physician who heads the Palestinian movement for non-violence says it’s now on the critical list, after Israel’s decision to press ahead with building 3,000 new homes in a corridor linking Jerusalem with a Jewish settlement.

“The two-state solution is dying before our eyes,” said Mustafa Barghouti, during a speaking tour sponsored by Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East. “Either the world community and (U.S. President Barack) Obama will save it by pressuring Israel to stop, or there will be nothing left to save.”

On Monday, Israel faced a barrage of diplomatic criticism from allies as well as foes, urging it to reconsider the move.

Unless that happens, Barghouti said, the Palestinian struggle will shift to a one-state solution that Israel wants to avoid — forming a shared state with equal rights for Israelis and Palestinians, and threatening Israel’s status as a Jewish state.

More: ultra-Orthodox Jews’ influence surging in Israel

The decision to go ahead with the settlement construction came after the Palestinians won an overwhelming vote to upgrade their UN status to “non-member observer state.” The settlement would isolate East Jerusalem from the West Bank, blocking the Palestinian claim to the city as their future capital — one of the main points of contention in the stalled peace negotiations.

Canada and the U.S. were in a small minority that opposed the vote, saying statehood can only result from negotiations with Israel.

But Israel’s response prompted a backlash from European countries, and a rare rebuke from Washington.

“We reiterate our long-standing opposition to Israeli settlement activity and East Jerusalem construction,” White House spokesman Jay Carney told reporters Monday. He said Israeli leaders should “reconsider these unilateral decisions and exercise restraint as these actions are counterproductive and make it harder to resume direct negotiations to achieve a two-state solution.”

Britain, France, Sweden, Spain and Denmark summoned their Israeli ambassadors, and Germany — a staunch ally — called on Israel to “reconsider” the settlement plan.

“Our ambassadors were called in and the countries protested about the announcement,” Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Paul Hirschson told the Associated Press.

Barghouti, who was in Ottawa on Monday, heads the Palestinian National Initiative, an independent political faction dedicated to achieving a Palestinian state through non-violence. He ran for president of the Palestinian Authority in 2005, and won 19 per cent of the vote.

He said the vote to give Palestine observer-state status has opened up new opportunities for opposing Israel’s settlement plans.

“It provides a very strong base that these are occupied, not disputed, territories,” he said. “It would allow us to demand the application of the Geneva Convention. We now have the ability to call for a meeting of the sponsors of the convention. They are responsible for its application.

“If Israel continues to evade the law, they are obliged to take steps,” he said, adding that could happen “quite soon.”
The widely accepted Fourth Geneva Convention on protection of civilians in time of war says that “the occupying power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own population into the territories it occupies.”

Israel has ratified the Geneva Conventions, but insists that the Palestinian territories were not under the “legitimate sovereignty” of any state when they were taken, and therefore not covered by the conventions.

The Palestinians could join UN agencies such as the anti-racism committee and the International Court of Justice, which settles disputes between states, Barghouti said.

Israel’s decision to build new settlements sent ripples of protest through left-wing Jewish groups.

Jerusalem-based lawyer Daniel Seidemann, an expert in settlements in the Jerusalem area, called it a “doomsday move,” and told Americans for Peace Now: “We are weeks away from the end of the two-state solution. By 2013, Jerusalem will be so balkanized that it will be impossible . . . to carve out a solution acceptable to both Israelis and Palestinians.”

Canadian Friends of Peace Now, in a statement Monday, said “the Netanyahu government’s moves to punish the Palestinian Authority for gaining UN recognition of limited Palestinian statehood (are) a deplorable exercise in exacerbating tensions.”

With files from Star wire services