

PALESTINE AT THE UN: OUTLOOK AND EXPECTED IMPLICATIONS

*Meliha Benli Altunisik**

The Palestinian Authority (PA) has initiated a process of application for UN membership ahead of the regular UN General Assembly meeting that would start on 20th September. The move was expected as the President of the PA, Mahmoud Abbas, had announced in March that they would seek the recognition of a Palestinian state at the UN in September.

The Reasons

The move seemed to come as a result of several concerns. First, there is the frustration with a “peace process” that has been going on for 20 years without an apparent end. The last round of direct talks once again broke down in September 2010. Netanyahu’s government in Israel refused to extend a temporary freeze on settlement expansion that it had accepted before as a result of pressure by the Obama Administration. Instead, the settlement expansion has been growing since then. The 19th May speech by US President Obama that called for Israelis and Palestinians to use the borders prior to the 1967 War as the basis for talks to achieve a negotiated solution was rejected outright by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Thus, the Palestinian Authority seems to have lost faith in the start of meaningful negotiations and the Obama Administration’s ability to put pressure on the Israeli government to do so. Second, all these developments are putting Abbas and the PA/PLO in a difficult position domestically. Increasingly, the Palestinians are seeing that despite the promises and the declared support of the international community for the PA/PLO they are not in a position to deliver. This has been weakening their position politically. Therefore, by raising the stakes the PA hoped that it would again attract the attention of the international community to the Palestinian issue, increase pressure on Israel and strengthen the PA/PLO position domestically.

Despite political problems, the PA has been preparing for statehood under the two-year state building plan of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad; a process which was recognized as progress by the reports of several international institutions like the IMF. The leadership of the PA/PLO in declaring recognition through the UN was also seen as looking for a way to achieve internal unity under the PA. This was something that was demanded by the Palestinians who went to the streets at the be-

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ginning of this year. The result was the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement in Cairo. That reconciliation process is not going as planned. A follow-up meeting planned for June has already collapsed. The feelings of mutual recrimination seem to block progress. Thus the PA/PLO may think that UN recognition would put more pressure on Hamas for reconciliation.

There is also a third factor that probably affected the Palestinian policy; the new environment in the Arab world after the beginning of the Arab uprisings. Although the Palestinian issue has not been part of the uprisings, it is clear that it is a major issue for the public throughout the Arab world. The rise of popular politics is bound to have an effect on the Palestinian issue. The PA may have calculated that it would look bad if the US and EU governments that support the Arab uprisings do not back the Palestinians on this issue.

The Process

Application for a new membership in the UN is approved by a two-thirds majority of the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council. The problem for the Palestinians starts at the Security Council as the US Administration has already announced that it would veto such a resolution. If that is the case, there are two possibilities for the PA. The first one is to get the Uniting for Peace Resolution invoked. The Resolution, which was adopted in 1950 at the US initiative, empowers the General Assembly when the Security Council is deadlocked and effectively helps to bypass the veto power. Yet it can be invoked either by the support of half the Member States or seven members of the Security Council. Thus, invoking the Uniting for Peace Resolution could still be difficult. Furthermore, it is not clear whether the resolution applies to membership issues.

A second option is to just go for a General Assembly Resolution, which would require a two-thirds majority of 193 members. The PA seems to be confident that they would reach that number. In any case, the General Assembly resolutions as such are not binding, they are just recommendations.

The Palestinians launched a diplomatic campaign last spring to get support for their bid. Despite US pressure, the Arab League declared its support in July 2011, a move that was expected in the wake of the Arab uprisings. Turkey has also declared its support. This is not directly tied to recently deteriorating Turkish-Israeli relations as Turkey had also recognized the Palestinian state that was declared by Arafat in 1988. There seems to be a diplomatic struggle over the issue between Israelis and Palestinians in the rest of the world. The countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa would be crucial in terms of numbers. In terms of political significance, European positions would be important. EU members seem to be split on the issue. How this would reflect on the vote of the individual countries remains to be seen. On the one hand, EU countries would be concerned about yet ano-

ther image of a divided EU on a foreign policy issue as well as re-emergence of a transatlantic divide. On the other hand, not supporting the Palestinians would undermine the already weak influence of the EU in the region in the wake of the Arab uprisings. The US position has been the most crucial and, despite initial mixed signals from the Obama Administration, it is clear that the US would veto such a resolution in the Security Council.

The Possible Consequences

Under these circumstances the most likely scenario is the Palestinian bid for a General Assembly resolution to recognize the Palestinian state and/or to upgrade its representation to a non-member permanent observer. If the Palestinians achieve one or two of these aims, it would have some symbolic and practical consequences. One of the practical consequences of being a non-member permanent observer would be to be able to become member of specialized agencies. Yet the exact content of this status is not clear as these membership categories do not exist in the UN Charter. The extent of the support for the Palestinian effort at the UN would provide international legitimacy but what all this means for recognition of statehood is a more complicated matter. International recognition is all but one aspect of statehood and even then it is not clear whether a General Assembly vote would mean that it is questionable.

Despite the possible limited legal and practical implications of the PA's move, the political implications could be far reaching. The Palestinians may face economic, political and security challenges as a result. On the one hand, the US Congress has threatened to cut economic aid, a measure that would have dire consequences for the Palestinian economy totally dependent on external support. On the other hand, the Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has threatened a series of "unilateral responses." Furthermore, a sense of little achievement may also create problems in domestic Palestinian politics as popular frustration may strengthen the hand of hard-liners. Thus the possibility of violence on both sides may increase. On the other hand, if there is strong support for the Palestinians in the UN, whatever the actual consequences on the ground, this would mean the isolation of Israel in the international arena. The negative attitudes of the US and the EU countries would create a reaction in the region and would mean loss of legitimacy at a time when their popularity was on the rise due to their support for the opposition forces in the Arab world. In any case, whatever the consequences of the PA's bid it seems that it would create new tensions that would not be helpful for a stable transition in the region. The return to real negotiations that would resolve the issue is, of course, the way to go but it is a goal that remains highly elusive under the circumstances.

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