

PALESTINE AT THE UN: OUTLOOK AND EXPECTED IMPLICATIONS*Mahdi Abdul Hadi**

The PLO/PA is determined to submit its bid for recognition of Palestinian statehood based on the 1967 borders with Jerusalem as its capital to the UN General Assembly in September. The Palestinian leadership is preparing a massive diplomatic campaign to lobby support for this initiative. This historical decision to approach the UN is of equal importance to that of the mutual PLO-Israel recognition in 1993.

A look at the internal, regional and international factors that led to this decision demonstrates why the UN bid is the most favorable political venue to proceed with from the Palestinian perspective.

Internally, the UN vote will empower Palestine's position in the international arena, helping to unite the people behind their leadership as well as advancing intra-Palestinian reconciliation. The move will fill the political vacuum of the futile negotiations and free the PLO/PA of its dependency on initiatives, offers and favors of external players. Israel has become accustomed to the way things are and has no urge to change [sees no urgency to changing] the status quo: it is in control of all the issues at stake, including land, natural resources, and people, while its own economy is flourishing. At the same time, nobody has emerged from the international community willing to take serious action to bring the occupation to an end. Settlements continue unabated as does the Judaization of Jerusalem, refugees keep being ignored and, on top of all of this, Israel wants a "Jewish" state. Moving the conflict into a new arena will also mobilize Palestinians to develop a non-violent movement and become part of the culture of the Arab Spring. Furthermore, Palestinians will gain new tools to end the "culture of prison" affecting all aspects of their lives, end the siege, closure and geographic separation, and open the door for Palestinians from the Diaspora to return unconditionally.

Regionally, the Arab Spring has spread its contagious fever of yearning for the birth of civil states, democracy, rule of law and Arab dignity; Palestine is no exception. The new Secretary General of the Arab League, Nabil Al-Arabi, considers the negotiations process as having reached a dead end: the Quartet has proven unable to move forward, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu clearly rejects a viable Palestinian state, President Obama will not act during his re-election campaign, and the 27

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EU member states will not agree on a consensus. Additionally, current Arab rulers, while politically, diplomatically and financially supportive of the Palestinians, are not holding on to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and seek neither a direct involvement nor a conflict with Washington. Thus, Al-Arabi favors an international conference under UN auspices and sees September as a “test” in that direction. The Arab League and the New Egypt are in full support of the September mission, and Turkey has repeatedly confirmed its full support for Palestine’s statehood bid.

Internationally, gaining membership as a state in the UN would “internationalize” the conflict by opening all Palestinian files (including unimplemented UN resolutions from over six decades) for debates at the UNGA and other international bodies (including the International Court of Justice). Membership would also open the opportunity to request protection by international forces and be part of international efforts or debates towards ending Israel’s colonizing drive in Palestine. With an estimated two thirds or more of the UN’s 192 member states in clear support and recognition of Palestinian rights, UN membership will also open the door to renewing discussion on Jerusalem as corpus separatum (including Bethlehem) with the idea of an open, shared (rather than an exclusively Israeli) city. Furthermore, the responsibility of the US and a few other states for the continuation of Israeli occupation and the denial of Palestinians’ right to self-determination will be exposed. In addition, recognition of Palestinian statehood will end the Oslo culture of draft agreements, vague negotiations, and the PA system, thereby assisting the PLO’s transformation into a State.

Nevertheless, not all Palestinians see September in a positive light; some fear that the current initiative would damage relations with the US and certain EU countries. There is also the fear that the move is premature as the Palestinian “house”, the society, is not prepared. There is no strategy, we are not united, we are divided, and we do not even have one government. Others are cynical, saying we will have the Palestinian flag all over and celebrate, but then we will be stuck with Israeli military occupation and the same leadership and nothing will change.

The line of reasoning here is that – unlike what many Israelis believe – President Abbas will not consider his mission as accomplished and resign after September, but stay on to rule and negotiate while “his men” remain in office or survive in any election. Consequently, negotiations will continue as “business as usual” and Palestinian society will remain divided between Fateh and Hamas. The main argument behind this is that President Abbas has succeeded in liberating himself from the ghost of Arafat and from Abu Lutf (the PLO’s official Foreign Minister) and in crushing his opponents. He created an 18-member Fateh Executive Committee that is loyal only to him. Some even question his seriousness regarding reconciliation since he is influenced by David Heal and Dennis Ross, who would rather have him go straight to negotiations.

One way out of the deadlock could be the process of elections (municipal, then PLC, then presidential elections). It is only a small window of opportunity for civil society. However, as the recent Chamber of Commerce elections in the West Bank have shown, there is a desire among people (in this case the business community) to participate in the future of their society, fight for their rights, and be part of the development in their own particular arena rather than leaving this for Fateh or Hamas.

Elections are also a way to overcome the impasse – if not lack – of [true?] Palestinian leadership. Preferably, the people should elect the prime minister directly (based on the Egyptian culture we witnessed: 'al-ashab yourid "people demand"), and not depend on Hamas and Fateh agendas. Hamas does not trust elections, believing they are designed to keep Prime Minister Fayyad in power, as he has money and some constituencies. Hamas also believes Israel will not allow them to participate. Within Fateh, elections will likely create even more divisions because several Fateh members personally consider themselves Abbas successors.

To have the prime minister elected directly would re-empower the position itself and the people's "will". However, this would require amending the Basic Law (which was amended once before, when the position of prime minister was injected in 2003, at that time in order to weaken Arafat). Once this has happened, there will be a legitimate government to represent the people. But will Israel and the West allow all this? They seem happy with the status quo and are occupied with their own internal challenges.

Israel would be well advised to have its own "awakening" on the September episode and free itself from the bluffs of Netanyahu and his like before it's too late. It needs to wake up and realize that the out-of-date movement that was once useful in establishing a state (Zionism) was a colonizing episode. It worked for a while, but it is time to end it – like Pan-Arabism, like Communism, and like Political Islam (with the symbolic death of Bin Laden). And it is time to realize that a Palestinian state cannot be reached without sharing Jerusalem and without a fair and just implementation of UN Resolution 194 (1948) on the right of return. It is time to realize that Palestinians will not accept the term "Jewish State", will never give up their souls, rights or identity, never melt in Jordan or elsewhere, and that 44 years of occupation and "prison culture" are enough. However, Israel is far from reaching such an understanding. In Israel today, the most racist mentality yet prevails: Israelis don't want to see Palestine, they think we don't (or shouldn't) exist, and that we don't belong. This is also clear from the last ten days, as Israeli military incursions in Gaza brought death and destruction on a daily basis. This is being done to provoke Hamas to a "counter" action to present a negative image marking Palestinians as "terrorists" in light of Palestine's bid at the UN.

One thing is sure: Palestinians after the September mission will not be the same as before. The Palestinian leadership and the people will have to translate the state recognition into realities on the ground. The most important challenge, however, will be to hinder Israel from keeping the new Palestine from enjoying sovereignty. Then, international protection will be key, following words (re-cognition) with deeds, or Palestinians will continue bleeding and suffering!

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