

Fresh Looks at the Palestinian Statehood Bid

By Zoughbi Zoughbi, Director of Wi'am - Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center Interviewed by Gabriella Kaiyal-Smith

What do you believe will be the steps the Palestinian government will take when the UN General Assembly opens on September 23?

Will the Palestinian government be able to secure the required 129 votes? We expect and predict that the main obstacle will be the United States vetoing this Palestinian demand at the Security Council level. I believe that we shall go on to the Security Council, even if they veto it, to the General Assembly. Let's put the world in front of its political responsibility once more. They have held on to the guilt they had for the Jewish people, which resulted in the UN resolution of 1947 that created Israel, but what makes us a lesser nation? We are the victims of the victims of the holocaust, and thus its direct victims and we too need our home, our safe haven. It is a symbolic victory on the General Assembly level but it will lead the Palestinians to think of different strategies for continuing their nonviolent struggles on the ground and to continue negotiations on equal footing. The younger generations might start to believe that they are giving the leadership their last chance for negotiations and then they will start the 3rd intifada. It is worth mentioning that 75% of the population in Gaza is under the age of 30 and 60% of the population in the West Bank is under the age of 24.

Based on the United States' likely veto in the UN Security Council, is the statehood request designed more for gaining recognition in the international community? What international outcomes would you expect, even if the veto occurs?

Keep in mind that even if it gets vetoed, if we have the 9 of 15 votes needed at the Security Council, we can evoke Resolution 377 and then the General Assembly can vote (requiring a 2/3 majority) to take our case to the General Assembly. Then, the General Assembly again votes on our case and they can declare us a state. If we have 2/3 of the UN General Assembly vote then it will strengthen our status because the recognition of the Palestinian state will force the world to affirm all the previous UN resolutions. This affirmation includes the International Court of Justice's 2004 advisory opinion regarding the illegal wall. The recognition of a Palestinian state would be in accordance with interim agreements, including the Camp David Accords, the Madrid talks that were materialized by the Oslo accords, and all the agreements with Israel and the international community. In addition, this issue is in the forefront of international discussions and the world will be talking about how the Palestinian state should have sovereign status that supports international laws.

What about the worry that the PLO will lose its representation as the sole legitimate voice for the Palestinian people?

The appeal to have state status at the UN will start a new initiative of struggle. It will start a new approach, calling for all the efforts and potential of the Palestinians to be accumulated in a more creative, innovative- yet assertive way. The PLO will be given a new life with this approach and it will play a different role.

Full recognition of Palestine as a state forces the world to face its collective responsibility. This bid for statehood shows the maturity of the Palestinian leadership to use this card at the moment when the Israeli government is looking for a scapegoat to implement its policy of aggression and to continue the unilateral actions of building more settlements, confiscating more land, continuing to build the wall, and denying the Palestinians their rights to self-determination and statehood. Personally, I find appealing for statehood a better decision than declaring war. Some of the right wing politicians in Israel were expecting the Palestinians to call for Jihad. With our statehood approach, the Palestinian leadership is depriving the Israeli right-wing government of excuses to continue with their apartheid. Nevertheless, the Israeli government doesn't need excuses for any unilateral action for its violation of human rights on all levels; but such behavior by the Israeli Government will bring more embarrassment.

If the statehood bid were to be passed, what sort of retaliation would you expect to see from the Israeli government?

No one knows, but Israel is always looking for justification. I think Israel cannot survive a long-term

war or a war of attrition with their Arab neighbors or the rest of the Middle East. Israel is looking for an easy success. They want to lure the Israeli people from their uprisings that call for social justice because Netanyahu aims to enhance his popularity. However, Israel is more equipped to fight than to have peace with its Arab neighbors. Therefore, they do not aim to start a full-scale war, but rather to make target-attacks. However Netanyahu needs to be reminded that he may make the decision to start a war, but he can never make the decision to end it.

Netanyahu has threatened to void the Oslo agreement if the Palestinians continue with their case for statehood. How do you believe the Arab governments in the region would be impacted by this and what might their reaction be?

Based on Netanyahu's policies, the Oslo agreement has always been nonexistent. The Israelis want all of their "historic" land and to have peace with its inhabitants as well, but they will "compromise" with us by giving us their version of peace in exchange for all of the land. But they are not ready for any kind of peace right now. The fact that the foreign minister of Israel, Avigdor Lieberman, is living in a West Bank settlement means that Israel already isn't recognizing the Oslo Accords.

What would it take for the United States to stop blindly aiding Israel?

Accountability. We need to help the Americans wage a diplomatic, social, and political struggles. They need to question where their tax money is going and what it is funding. Is their money going to enslave another race of people? To kill another nation? Or not? If the people have demonstrations for social justice, why don't those privileged (the Americans) join them in their call for rights? I also believe that the Arab world needs a better public relations plan to deal with our issues within the American government and the American people. The West is not our enemy and Arab nation is not made of terrorists, extremists or fundamentalists. There is no clash of civilizations; there is a clash of ignorances across the world. As people of culture we are called on a daily basis to reason with the culture of other religions but not to demonize and label others. There should be a mutually inclusive dignity and respectful approaches that considers all people to be equal on this planet.

When do you believe further negotiations will occur, due to the insistence of the US and Israeli governments? What compromises will the Israeli/US government request for the Palestinian people to make?

We are calling for negotiations that occur on equal footing, not between jailer and prisoner but between two states. We need a 3rd party that is honest and equal-handed to facilitate these negotiations. This does not mean the United States at this point. We are calling for people who aim to empower the weak and bring the strong to their senses but not their knees. It is not easy and it is more likely a wish than a future reality. But this is why we need the Quartet on the Middle East to play its effective role in the negotiations. The Palestinians are questioning the use of the United Nations considering that between the Security Council and the General Assembly there have been over 150 resolutions passed concerning Palestine.

Many say that Israel is "used to dealing with leaders, not people" in the Arab world and thus is losing support in the region. Do you expect to see Israel make any major foreign policy changes based on this new geo-political landscape?

Israel has always eluded the world by crying wolf. But we can see the impact of the Arab Spring masses on Israeli society. These Israeli demonstrations raise the slogan "People Need Social Justice" but this can only happen with a regime change and social justice for all.

Israel also must know that the Arab nations are what will remain, not the Arab regimes. They need to coexist with the Arabs, and they need to work with the nations that are not happy with the occupation of their brothers and sisters. You can see what is happening with the Israeli-Egyptian relationship; the people aren't happy with these agreements and they are creating a big uproar. Israel will not find it easy to deal with these empowered masses as long as the occupation continues. They need to rethink their strategies and aim for good relationships with their Arab neighbors. Rather than building walls between them they should be building bridges.

Is the right to return for Palestinian refugees in danger because of this statehood bid? If the proposal is accepted, how would UNWRA's support for the refugees change or diminish?

No one can deny that some Palestinian experts believe this will deprive the refugees of the right to return and reparations. Of course there is such doubt and fear. But I think we need to use all means

possible to continue the implementation of UN resolutions, including the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland, with compensation. We aren't looking to UNWRA to be our future crutch; we aren't looking for food packages, charities, or services from the United Nations. There should be acknowledgement for the responsibility that Israel holds for Nakba 1948. Israel is not an exception and they will not be excused from having to make amends simply because they received reparations for their suffering. We are talking about the UN 194 resolution compensating for these Palestinians and helping them recover from all that they have lost since 1948. This could amount to at least \$100 billion that would help them settle into their homes- wherever they choose for those homes to be.

This request for statehood will not replace the negotiations and it will not be an alternative to our human rights. UNGA Resolution 3236 states that the right of independence of Palestine is "inalienable" and that the Palestinian people have a right to a "sovereign and independent" state. UNGA Resolution 2672 declared that respecting the Palestinians' inalienable rights is an indispensable element to the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East. Appealing to the UN embarrasses all the European nations and the United States faced with this double-standard if they vote against the appeal. They support the Arab Spring and are willing to supply these protestors with militia, power, and arms, whilst they simultaneously are supporting Israel's enslavement of the Palestinian people, who have been struggling since the 1900s, primarily in unarmed struggle.

Some also may question what will happen to the Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. I believe that upgrading our UN status to membership will upgrade their situation to be prisoners of war.

Many of the activists in the West Bank, Gaza, and the diaspora are calling for the reorganization and/or dissolution of the Palestinian Authority. If Palestine became a state, what kinds of reorganization within the government would you expect to see? What do the Palestinian people wish to see in future political parties?

We are looking to create a civil society; a state based on democratic citizenship and the separation of the three powers. We are not looking to replace this occupation with a dictatorship. We will struggle for our democratic state by all means. We need to discuss majority rules and minority rights and debate about political issues, not religious affiliations. For this, we look toward using a diverse and unified approach. We are talking about a state that can invest in medical, social, educational, and economic fields. There is no shortage of political parties in Palestine but I think that our people don't want to be political animals. We need active political parties that represent the Palestinian peoples and need to respond to the dreams, ambitions, and hopes of the masses. We are looking for a Palestinian state that respects human rights and we will look toward leaders that can perform their duty and obligation of ensuring that our state fulfills all its responsibilities. .

How would the Palestinian role in the Knesset change as a result of a Palestinian state?

I believe that if/when the United Nations accepts the Palestinian appeal to have two states, there will be Palestinians who will choose to continue to live in Israel and wish to enjoy full access to their rights, as their families have been there for hundreds of years. These Palestinian who live in Israel will eventually become part of the Israeli political process. Palestinians may continue to choose to live in America, Russia, France, etc, but they will nonetheless have their own identity. The Palestinians in Israel could be a bridge for the future if we would like to still obtain the dream of one secular, democratic, bi-national state. For the long run many Palestinians and some Israelis think that one-state is the most ever-lasting solution, but it needs to meet the will of all people. We are talking about a possible justice, a relative, restorative, or potential justice, but not a punitive justice. Despite the fact that I am pro-restorative justice, I think a two-state solution could provide the minimal justice needed to give way to opportunities that would allow the Palestinians to control and develop themselves. Hopefully they will begin planning for a future of prosperity that will gain more momentum for the peace process over time. The declaration of the state is not going to be the end. It will not be the start of mimicking Israel's policy- we will not try to put an end to Israel. We are clear that Israel should withdraw from all 1967 occupied territories including East Jerusalem. There should be a continuous geographic area that provides an accessible corridor between the West Bank and Gaza. Palestinians must control all their rightfully owed natural resources, should have the freedom of movement, should have control over their own borders, and should have the rights of the refugees recognized based on the implementation of UN resolution 194.

How has the "Arab Spring" influenced the Palestinian activist community in the West Bank, Gaza, and the Diaspora? What parallels have you seen between the tactics used by activists in the Arab Spring and recent movements in the Palestinian community?

I can say that Palestine has its Arab Spring in their determination to end the occupation and struggle for liberation. They have their vigils to end the disunity between Hamas and Fatah.. Israel is not immune to such change, which will likely be instigated by the Palestinian youth. The young people can achieve much more than the traditional governments have. For example, the 63rd anniversary of Nakba showed the power of the youth to break the borders between Arab countries through historic Palestine and even the regimes with their military power couldn't break this.

What do you expect to see if the Third Intifada gains momentum? How will the diaspora be involved?

We would prefer for the recognition of a Palestinian state to precede any calls for a 3rd intifada. I also hope that the future and present negotiations will not be futile; however this requires pressure on Israel to abide by international agreements, such as the 4th Geneva Convention. Whether there will be a 3rd intifada or not, the Palestinian diaspora will continue to contribute to the future of the Palestinian people, whether in building institutions (medical, social, or academic), or in being our ambassadors all over the world, calling for justice and coexistence. I think it is a great wealth to have Palestinians in the diaspora, in the four corners of the world. What is needed is more coordination and cooperation in their leadership for their motherland. We would like the Palestinian diaspora to be active in their own countries and be a voice of pluralism, a voice of democracy, and a voice of the voiceless Palestinian people. They should create coalitions to help those struggling against injustices all over the world, not only in Palestine. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr says, "Any injustice anywhere is a fringe on justice everywhere."

How do you feel that the international BDS movements have influenced this move towards statehood? What would be the role of BDS if statehood were achieved? BDS is also one of the many parallels between the South African and Palestinian struggles. Do you believe our struggle's end will parallel South Africa's as well?

Many believe that the South African apartheid regime would not have toppled were it not for a strong BDS movement. The international community sees the use of BDS as a positive way to end the occupation. The world needs to be liberated from this guilty feeling that Israel has tried to instill in them and the world should be helping Israel shed its victim identity through BDS. And BDS is getting a very positive response, particularly from the Westerners. There is a growing movement among institutions, often religious or ideological, that are calling for divestment and academic, economic, and sports-related boycott. This is part of our struggle to achieve restorative justice, as BDS aims to address the problems rather than avenge them. With BDS, no one is taking an offensive approach and stating that we want to destroy Israel. Also the Palestinians must stop working in the settlements or on any project that belongs to the oppressive Israeli occupation, even if they must work out of necessity.

Through subjective, objective, and international methods South Africa joined the community of nations by ending the apartheid regime. We can take many lessons from South Africa but also the American civil rights movement, Northern Ireland, and the Balkans. We should network with those peoples who have begun to see freedom after such a long period of struggle. We can even see parallels in the separation of East and West Germany that manifested in the Wall. South Africa and the aforementioned peoples are raising stars of hope that justice will prevail inevitably and that injustice cannot last forever.

Friday the 23rd of Sept. is a turning point in the Palestinian Calendar where the battle of building institutions, restoring dignity and liberating the land and the people will get legitimacy on the World Political level after getting it long ago on the popular level.

Vote for Palestine ... Please don't let us down!!!

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"WI'AM"