



The Palestinian Quest for Statehood at the United Nations: International Reactions and India's Position

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Summary

On Friday, September 23, 2011, President Mahmoud Abbas requested full UN membership for a Palestinian State. While his announcement was met by a thunderous applause at the UN General Assembly, the fate of the Palestinian State is yet to be decided as major international actors such as the US and Europe are now manoeuvring to keep the official bid from actually being presented at the UN Security Council. In spite of growing relations with the US and Israel, India has maintained its traditional support for the Palestinian cause. It has already announced its support for the Palestinian bid for statehood. In view of disagreements among the UNSC members on President Abbas' recent initiative, and good relations with both Israel and the Palestinians, India has a unique opportunity to play a role in the West Asian peace process.

On Friday, September 23, 2011, President Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader, formally requested full United Nations (UN) membership for a Palestinian State on the basis of the June 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. President Abbas also added that this move was not meant in any way to de-legitimise or isolate Israel but was an effort to revive gridlocked negotiations.¹ While his announcement was met by a thunderous applause at the UN General Assembly (UNGA), the fate of the Palestinian State is yet to be decided as major international actors such as the US and Europe are now manoeuvring to keep the official bid from actually being presented at the UN Security Council (UNSC).

In fact, President Abbas' official bid for a Palestinian State marks only the beginning of a lengthy procedure. For the next few weeks, the UN, the US, Europe and Russia (the Quartet) will be negotiating a new plan to resume direct Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and to delay a contentious vote on the Palestinian demand as long as possible. The US has indeed threatened to use its veto power if needed. However, the Barack H. Obama Administration would rather prefer finding a face-saving agreement as vetoing Palestinian demand could have damaging consequences for its already fragile diplomatic reputation in the region. Nabil Shaath, a senior Palestinian official, has said that they could count on more than 9 votes out of 15 at the UNSC which may obligate the US to veto the Palestinian bid.² If the UNSC fails to act quickly on their demand, the Palestinian Authority has announced that it would go to the UNGA to obtain a permanent observer status (a sort of antechamber of state-hood).

Palestinian Motives

President Abbas' demand can be seen as another logical and symbolic step towards international recognition of the Palestinian statehood. The Palestinian quest for statehood began in the summer of 1947 when the UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) recommended the partition of Palestine into two states, which became a tangible political reality in 1988 when the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) unilaterally proclaimed the establishment of a new "State of Palestine" (but at the time the PLO had no control of any territory). Abbas also described his bid as an act of 'peaceful defiance' to the current Israeli government's strategy of settlements which Abbas described as an 'entrenching occupation' of the Palestinian land which is 'destroying' any legitimate possibility of a two-state solution.³ Finally, Abbas' UN bid was a move meant to break the hurting stalemate in triangular discussions involving the Palestinian National Authority, Israel and the US. Abbas said that all international-led efforts over the last two years have been

¹ Transcript of President Mahmoud Abbas' Speech at the UNGA, September 23, 2011.

² Barney Jopson, RoulaKhalaf and James Blitz, 'Palestinians pursue votes in Security Council', *Financial Times*, September 21, 2011.

³ Transcript of President Mahmoud Abbas' Speech at UNGA, September 23, 2011.

undermined by the Israeli government, which has ruined hopes for negotiations and led him to this radical decision.⁴

President Abbas' bid for Palestinian statehood must also be seen as part of his strategy to raise his personal profile at the domestic level since he is considered as a low-profile leader seeking to avoid direct confrontation with Israel and the US.⁵ Abbas' relatively radical stance seems to be partly motivated by his attempt to consolidate his domestic position and to reinforce the legitimacy of the Palestinian National Authority *vis-à-vis* its rival, the Hamas (which has greeted Abbas' move with scepticism).⁶ It also demonstrates the growing disillusionment among the Palestinians after almost twenty years of protracted discussions. Abbas' strategy has been in action for quite some time now as is demonstrated by the recent visit of the special envoy of the Palestine National Authority, Nabil Shaath, to New Delhi where he met India's External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna and also Minister of State for External affairs E. Ahamed. The envoy "sought India's support for the Palestinian cause especially during the forthcoming UN session" to which the Indian Foreign Minister Krishna responded by reiterating India's "strong and unwavering support to the Palestinian cause."⁷

International Reactions

The Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in his speech at the UNGA on Friday, September 23, 2011 dismissed the Palestinian application as premature. He stressed on the need for a bilateral peace agreement and described the UN forum as a "theatre of the absurd."⁸ He also emphasised on Israel's existential threat from militant Islam and Israel's need for strategic depth, thereby implicitly rebuffing any negotiations based on pre-1967 borders. This could further isolate Israel when an international consensus - supported notably by President Obama in a May 2011 speech⁹ - is emerging on a two-state solution on the basis of pre-1967 borders.

At the regional level, the Arab states have supported the Palestinian National Authority's diplomatic push at the UN for a full-fledged Palestinian State despite the US threat to veto such a move. The Arab League formally backed the Palestinian bid in July 2011.¹⁰

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ 'UN Speech Gives Abbas a Stronger Hand', *The Guardian*, September 27, 2011.

⁶ 'Abbas Speech at UN Lifts Palestinian Spirits', *Hindustan Times*, September 24, 2011.

⁷ S. Samuel C. Rajiv, 'India and the Palestinian Bid for Statehood at the UN', *IDSA Comment*, September 19, 2011.

⁸ Transcript of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Speech at UNGA, September 23, 2011.

⁹ 'Barack Obama's Middle East Speech', May 19, 2011.

¹⁰ Tobias Buck, 'Arab League Backs Palestinian Statehood Plan', *Financial Times*, July 14, 2011.

This was further confirmed at the meeting of the Arab League members in Cairo in September 2011, just a few days prior to the UNGA meeting in New York.¹¹ In the context of deteriorating relations between Israel and the Arab world, the Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's remark at the Arab League meeting that the recognition of a Palestinian State was not only 'an option but an obligation' assumes significance.¹² It may be regarded as a strong gesture of support for the Palestinian cause from a country that until recently has had full diplomatic relations with Israel. It was following the 2010 attack by Israeli commandos on a Turkish aid flotilla bound for Gaza that Turkey decided to down grade its strategic ties with Israel. However, while Arab leaders have made strong diplomatic gestures, support for the Palestinian bid seems to be lacking at the wider local level in the Arab world. Except in some Palestinian cities, there have been very few solidarity marches and demonstrations in the streets of Arab capitals.¹³

President Abbas' initiative has also demonstrated strong divisions within the Quartet, seriously questioning its legitimacy as an efficient mediating mechanism. For example, Russia supported the Palestinian bid by September 12¹⁴ while France and Britain have not yet made their voting intentions official. The Quartet's position on the Palestinian bid remains vague.¹⁵

Similar to Israel's position, the US has also dismissed the bid as untimely and reiterated that the UN is probably not the right forum to solve this bilateral problem. The Obama Administration's position could be described as one of 'rhetorical entrapment' as it had supported the creation of a Palestinian State a year earlier. The US Administration neither wants to inflame public opinion in the Arab world by exercising veto power against the Palestinian bid, nor risk pressurising Israel, a move which could alienate Jewish voters and more significantly campaign donors in view of the coming 2012 presidential elections.¹⁶

As a result, the US has discussed the issue with different UNSC members to ensure that they either abstain or vote against the statehood bid. This would mean that the US would avoid using its veto power. Other than India, Russia and China, who have traditionally supported the Palestinian cause and who have made their voting intentions quite clear, the vote of countries like Gabon, Colombia, Portugal, Nigeria, Bosnia, Lebanon, Brazil

¹¹ 'Arab States to 'Back Palestine Statehood Bid'', *Al Jazeera*, September 13, 2011.

¹² 'Erdogan: Recognizing Palestinian State is an Obligation', *The Jerusalem Post*, September 13, 2011.

¹³ Francis Matthew, 'Silence Falls on Palestine's Bid for UN Membership', *Gulfnews.com*, October 13, 2011.

¹⁴ Russia to Back Palestinian UN Bid for Statehood', *Outlook*, September 12, 2011.

¹⁵ Neil MacFarquhar and Steven Lee Myers, 'Palestinians Request U.N. Status; Powers Press for Talks', *The New York Times*, September 23, 2011.

¹⁶ Ibid.

and South Africa (the non-permanent members of the UNSC) too would be crucial. The US, Israel and Palestine have been actively lobbying for support with different UNSC members for the past few weeks. Palestine has said that countries like Lebanon, Brazil, South Africa, Gabon and Nigeria would most likely back their bid. This means Palestine may have eight votes on its side, one short of the nine needed for membership. This is why President Abbas travelled to Latin America early October in order to win Colombia's support and is expected to travel to Portugal and Bosnia in the coming weeks. Abbas' diplomatic tour in Latin America was expected to fail as Colombia remains the biggest recipient of the US military aid after Pakistan and some of the West Asia countries; and has traditionally refused to support Palestine's statehood demand.¹⁷

Finally, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has suggested a 'non-member observer status' (like the Vatican, Taiwan and Kosovo) for Palestine.¹⁸ This may help in checking the risk of violence and demonstrations breaking out in the Arab world in case of veto or 'no' vote at the Security Council; and may also reduce the chances of Israel getting further isolated in the region. Abbas has accepted that different alternatives have been suggested to him, and has indicated that the French proposal can be considered, notably as an option B, if the statehood bid is not accepted at the UNSC.

India's Reaction

A week before President Abbas made his formal demand at the UN, the Indian Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai announced that India would support the Palestinian bid.¹⁹ Interestingly, India took a stand barely few hours after Abbas had announced his intention to ask for full UN membership. India was one of the rare UNSC (permanent and non-permanent) members to openly declare its voting intention. This position was confirmed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Saturday, September 24, 2011 in his speech to the UNGA. He expressed India's steadfast support for the Palestinians' struggle for a sovereign, independent and a united state of Palestine. He added that India would welcome Palestine as an equal member of the UN.²⁰

India's position comes as anything but a surprise if one observes it in the context of its historical and continuing support for a Palestinian State. India was the first non-Arab country to recognise the PLO's authority as "the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people" in 1974 and a PLO office was set up in the Indian capital in 1975, with

¹⁷ 'Abbas Woos 'Latin America's Israel' in Palestinian State Bid', *Bloomberg Businessweek*, October 11, 2011.

¹⁸ Arnaud Leparmentier and Corine Lesnes, 'Etat Palestinien: Sarkozy Propose un Statut Comparable à Celui du Vatican', *Le Monde*, September 21, 2011.

¹⁹ 'India to Back Palestinian Bid for U.N. Membership', *The Hindu*, September 17, 2011.

²⁰ Transcript of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Speech at UNGA, September 24, 2011.

full diplomatic relations established in March 1980.²¹ In his statement, Foreign Secretary Mathai also reminded that India was the first non-Arab country to recognise Palestine when it was proclaimed in November 1988.²² It may therefore be said that there has been no change in India's well-established position on the issue of Palestinian statehood. India's support must also be seen as representative of its regional policy for the past twenty years. India wants to engage many actors in the region such as Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia for geopolitical, economic and energy reasons. All these countries support the Palestinian bid, and India has traditionally sided with its West Asian partners in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Finally, India's position must also be interpreted in a purely pragmatic sense as a low-cost and non-committal diplomatic venture in West Asia. Since India's pro-Palestine policy has been well-known, it did not come as a surprise to any of its regional and international partners. India's stance can be regarded as non-committal in the sense that the bid is likely to be blocked by the US at the UNSC and that any formal demand for UN membership would end up on a compromise after further negotiations where India could eventually play a role.

India's Position

India's stance on the Palestinian bid for statehood did not evoke any strong reaction from Western powers as was the case earlier when India took position on Libyan or Syrian issue.²³ Differences of perception with Western powers over the management of Arab Spring and the Palestinian issue has thus far not impacted on India's bid for a permanent seat in the UNSC as members are themselves divided.

Similarly, growing Indo-US relations have not been adversely affected by India's position. The US Administration and the US media have never mentioned India as one of the potential pivot actors at the UNSC they need to negotiate with to prevent the vote for Palestinian statehood from obtaining a majority. Since India's position on Palestine is well-documented and acknowledged, the US diplomats never believed they could obtain Indian support on this matter. It is equally difficult to see how the American administration which supported the bid for Palestinian statehood a year ago could hold the Indian position against them in further discussions.

The most pressing question remains regarding the possible impact of India's support for Palestinian statehood on Indo-Israeli relations. The first interesting sign is that there were no direct negative reactions from either the Israeli government or the Israeli press about

²¹ P.R. Kumaraswamy, *India's Israel Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 178.

²² 'India to Back Palestinian Bid for U.N. Membership', *The Hindu*, September 17, 2011.

²³ Daniel Twining, 'What we Learned from the Security Council Debate over Libya', *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2011; Aziz Haniffa, 'Great Powers Have to Make choices', *Rediff.com*, March 25, 2011.

India's support. For example, the Israeli Ambassador to India, Alon Ushpiz, did not express any disappointment when asked by the Indian media about India's decision to support the Palestinian bid. He categorically remarked, 'It's not about disappointment...Israel and India are tremendously intimate friends. We face same challenges. We hold friendly, frank and transparent dialogue on all issues.'²⁴ When asked if Israel officially complained about the vote, he added that 'friends should not protest against each other.'²⁵ The Israeli Ambassador also observed that Israel was not taken by surprise in view of India's known historical position on the Palestinian issue, and that it would not hurt their collaboration on other issues. He clearly stated that 'relations between India and Israel are one of the most intimate, frank and important Israel has. When two countries reach this kind of intimacy, one should be able not to isolate specific issues - even if you have differences of opinion.'²⁶

The muted Israeli reaction stands in sharp contrast with the kind of public outrage that arose following Indian President Pratibha Patil's visit to Damascus in November 2010 and her subsequent comments on the need to find an agreement on the basis of pre-1967 borders for a Palestinian State.²⁷ The Israeli reaction can be explained by the fact that India's position on the Palestinian issue has been well known to the Israeli leadership.²⁸ In the last 20 years, defence and economic relations between India and Israel have thrived in spite of India's strong pro-Palestine (if not anti-Israeli) positions at the UN and other international forums. There seems to be an informal understanding with the Israelis that it is not a zero-sum relationship and India wants to engage different actors in the region. Both countries have managed to differentiate between growing bilateral defence and economic relations and India's position in multilateral and regional forums. Noting that India has full diplomatic relations with Israel since 1992 and 'excellent relations' with the US, the Indian Ambassador to the UN, Hardeep Puri, observed that these different relationships would not influence each other and modify India's position on Palestinian statehood.²⁹

Conclusion

The latest developments in West Asia could have different strategic implications for India. Abbas' diplomatic move may inspire all sides to return to the bargaining table. For example,

²⁴ Ashok Tuteja, 'Palestine Issue: Israel Rules Out Third-Party Intervention', *The Tribune*, September 26, 2011.

²⁵ Shubhajit Roy, 'Palestine's UN Bid a Negative Development, Says Israel', *Indian Express*, September 23, 2011.

²⁶ Srijana Mitra Das, 'The UN is quite a Difficult Arena for us to Operate in', *Times of India*, September 28, 2011.

²⁷ Jim Colbert, 'India's Misunderstood Israel Policy', *The Diplomat*, December 1, 2010.

²⁸ Samuel Rajiv, 'Palestine's Strongest UN Ally?', *The Diplomat*, September 21, 2011.

²⁹ Suman Guha Mozumder, 'India to back Palestine's UN bid, reassures PM', *Rediff.com*, September 22, 2011.

the discussions could resume in less than a month, and the Quartet is now also talking about a 2012 deadline to find a final agreement.³⁰ But if this is the case, on what conditions will the new discussions be based on? On his latest trip to West Asia, the US Defence Secretary, Leon Panetta, warned that Israel is getting 'increasingly isolated' in the last few months and has urged both parties to re-engage in peace talks promptly³¹. The recent decision by Israel and Hamas to exchange prisoners, including the release of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit who has been in Hamas captivity since 2006, has demonstrated a new willingness on both sides to resume negotiations and to move ahead on remaining deadlocks.³² In this new configuration, could India play a new and constructive part? India has traditionally played a balancing role between supporting the Quartet roadmaps and also supporting more radical moves like the Palestinian unilateral effort towards statehood. Does India need to start offering its own mid-range propositions?

In the context of India's growing role in the West Asia peace process, New Delhi must also monitor domestic developments in Palestine and qualify its support accordingly. India first needs to assess how popular this new initiative is in the Palestinian territories. Abbas' UN move was also the result of internal divisions, and a last-ditch effort by the Palestinian National Authority to avoid further loss of domestic credibility.³³ Facing severe crisis of legitimacy among the younger Palestinians, the Palestinian Authority had nothing else to offer than to seek UN recognition of statehood to reinforce its own position.³⁴ Furthermore, Abbas' effort to gain UN recognition was strongly opposed by Hamas which still controls most of Gaza. This diplomatic move might help Abbas and his successor in buying some more time to strengthen their position, but it is not likely to resolve the institutional problems afflicting the Palestinian struggle. India will therefore have to first assess how far Abbas could go in his UN strategy without assurances of strong support at home.

Second, India needs to evaluate the practical and legal implications of such a proposal. For instance, it is not yet clear how much Abbas' statehood bid would really help the Palestinians on the ground. What would the creation of the Palestinian State mean, for example, for the status of refugees and their right to return? Until Palestine has a permanent

³⁰ Neil MacFarquhar and Steven Lee Myers, 'Palestinians Request U.N. Status; Powers Press for Talks', *The New York Times*, September 23, 2011.

³¹ Craig Whitlock, 'Panetta Describes Israel as "Increasingly Isolated"', *The Washington Post*, October 3-2011.

³² Barak Ravid, Avilssacharoff and Jack Houry, 'Israel, Hamas reach Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange deal, officials say', *Haaretz*, October 11, 2011.

³³ 'Curb Your Enthusiasm: Israel and Palestine after the UN', *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Report 112, September 12 2011.

³⁴ 'Arab States to 'Back Palestine Statehood Bid'', *Al Jazeera*, September 13, 2011.

population living in defined borders, it will not meet the international criterion of statehood. India must be cautious and demand more detailed propositions from the Palestinian Authority to deal with ground realities. These are issues of concern that President Abbas will have to address and clarify his position both at the domestic and international levels. While the UN bid might create new incentives to break the current status-quo, a final settlement of the issue will only be possible through a bilateral agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

As India enjoys good relations with both the parties, New Delhi has a unique opportunity to play a role in the West Asian peace process. Being a member of the UNSCOP since 1947, India always wanted to contribute to the peaceful resolution of the Palestinian issue. However, India was never invited to participate in regional peace conferences until diplomatic ties were established with Israel in January 1992. India's role began to be acknowledged thereafter as was evident from the participation of India for the first time in a conference on West Asian peace process held at Annapolis in 2007 where both Israel and the Palestinian Authority welcomed India's participation.³⁵ Unlike earlier times, India today is relatively well-positioned to contribute to the ongoing efforts for the resumption of Israel-Palestinian peace talks in the coming weeks.

³⁵ Indrani Bagchi, 'India to 'play its Due Role' in Middle East', *The Times of India*, November 29, 2007.