

Palestine's UN status change: what comes next?

Eberhard Rhein

On 30 November 2012, Israel suffered one of its worst ever diplomatic defeats. It was not able to prevent the UN from upgrading the status of the Palestinian Authority in the General Assembly from 'observer' to 'non-member observer state' status. More than two thirds of the 193 UN member states voted in favour of such an upgrade, with only USA, Canada, the Czech Republic and five other tiny countries voting against.

With 132 states having already formally recognised Palestinian statehood, the vote was to be expected. What came as a nasty surprise for Israel was the fact that, despite intensive diplomatic pressure by Israel and USA, only one EU member state voted against the Palestinian resolution, with the remaining member states split between support and abstention.

Three major reasons may explain Israel's adamant opposition to the Palestinian *démarche*:

a) It will facilitate Palestinian membership of specialised UN organisations.

The International Criminal Court in The Hague comes to mind.

With Palestine's enhanced UN status, the Court might take up Palestinian complaints about Israeli settlement policy, which the Court considers as war crimes.

But the Palestinian Authority might also ask for membership of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, hoping to draw on their financial assistance.

b) It is likely to strengthen the Palestinian position in bilateral peace negotiations that will have to follow.

c) It may ease the path towards full UN membership for Palestine.

Both Germany and Switzerland have passed through the status of non-member observer state before being fully admitted to the UN.

In any event, however tiny the diplomatic upgrading may appear to the layman, it may turn out to be a giant step toward the shaping of a Palestinian State. We can trust the subtlety of Palestinian politicians and diplomats in scoring their success in New York in order to build on it to further improve their standing in the world.

But what matters infinitely more is to build on this achievement in order to conclude a permanent peace agreement with Israel. The failure of 25 years' efforts since the signing of the Oslo Agreement in 1986 shows the immense difficulties of achieving this objective. That failure was attributable to both sides. Both sides will have to accept painful and politically extremely difficult compromises; and both have to cope with their 'extremist elements'.

It will therefore require an unprecedented commitment by the main players – the USA, the EU, Egypt, and the GCC (the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf) – to 'push' the adversaries into a negotiation process and accept its outcome.

Time will be precious.

The USA starts with a new Administration; without its active involvement right from the start, any negotiation effort will be doomed. Israel will have a new government in early 2013; and the present EU administration has another 18 months to go.

In early December the German and Israeli governments meet for their periodic exchange of views. The German foreign minister has stressed the importance of getting the negotiation process re-started. A consensus on the principle of a rapid resumption of negotiations should therefore be the most important result of the Berlin talks.

The EU should assume a much higher profile than during the last few years. It can no longer be satisfied with the unsustainable role of a major financier of the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian refugees. It should not hesitate to threaten the parties with stopping its financial support if they were to fail in their negotiations.

Last but not least, the GCC will have to play an extremely important role in persuading the parties in Gaza to accept the existence of the State of Israel, without which there will never be a Palestinian State or lasting peace.

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