

IMPLICATIONS OF PALESTINIAN APPLICATION FOR UN MEMBERSHIP ON EUROMED RELATIONS AND ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

KARIM MAKDISI

Associate Professor of International Politics, Dept. of Political Studies and Public Administration; and Associate Director, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. American University of Beirut

On 23rd September 2011, the President of the Palestinian National Authority and Chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) Mahmoud Abbas formally submitted an “application of the State of Palestine for admission to membership in the United Nations” simultaneously to both the Security Council (SC) and the General Assembly (GA). The Palestinian bid for UN membership is based on the Palestinian people’s “natural, legal and historic rights”; on the 181 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution of 29th November 1947 (“UN Partition Plan”), and on the Declaration of Independence of the State of Palestine of 15th November 1988, as well as on the UNGA’s acknowledgement of this Declaration one month later. It should be noted that over 135 states (i.e. 2/3 of UNGA) have recognized the State of Palestine, including most of the EU Partners in the Euromed zone and a number of the Eastern European states of the EU. Moreover, EU states such as Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Sweden, Norway, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom have all recently upgraded the Palestinian General Delegations in their capitals to diplomatic missions and embassies, a status usually reserved for states. In the UN membership application, Abbas “solemnly declares that the State of Palestine is a peace-loving nation and that it accepts the obligations contained in the Charter of the United Nations and solemnly undertakes to fulfill them.” In an explanatory annex, Abbas further asserts the Palestinian people’s inalienable right to self-determination, as well as independence within the “vision of a two-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict” on the basis of the 4th June 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital and consistent with the rights of Palestinian refugees in accordance with international law and UN resolutions, in particular with the UNGA resolution 194 of 1948.

The Palestinian bid for membership was received with great fanfare within the UN, particularly since Lebanon – representing the Arab states’ overwhelming support for the application – chaired the rotating presidency of the Security Council (SC). A majority of the then-SC members had expressed their intention to move ahead with the vote, including China, Russia, and Brazil, but the United States was vehemently against it and threatened to use its veto to block any vote in the SC. President Barack Obama dismissed the application as “symbolic actions to isolate Israel in the United Nations,” while the US Ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, echoed official Israeli sentiment by calling the bid a “dangerous diversion” to a bilateral “negotiation process” between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israel. For its part, the EU, as well as most of the individual Member States, officially support the two-state solution, but they made it clear that they would not now support a full UN membership for Palestine outside the framework of a negotiated arrangement with Israel. Still, several European parliaments, such as those of Sweden and Spain, have urged their governments to recognize the Palestinian state, and the European Parliament passed a resolution stating that it “supports and calls

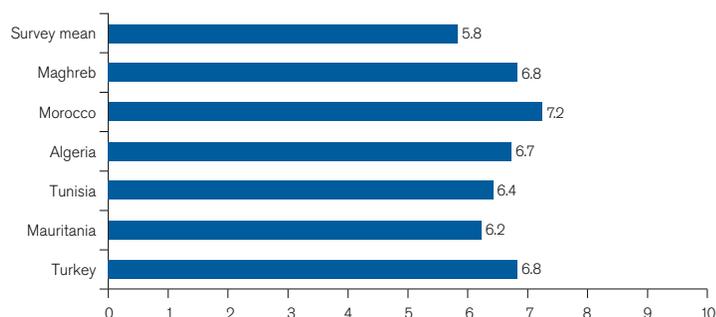
on Member States to be united in addressing the legitimate demand of the Palestinians to be represented as a state at the United Nations.”

Yet nearly a year after the submission of the Palestinian application for full UN membership to the SC, there has been little progress on the dossier, as the US has made sure that the SC sub-committee created to evaluate the bid stalls. The PA itself, under EU and US pressure, has consented to leave its bid on the back-burner for the time being, and has not brought the application for *non-state membership* to the General Assembly for a vote it could expect to win. This has, in turn, weakened the PA even more in the eyes of the Palestinian people, most of whom realizing just how toothless the PA really is given that it was created as a product of the failed Oslo Process serving Israeli occupation interests. The call for the dissolution of the PA and return to a national resistance struggle against occupation, and for a one state solution that would serve as a genuine democratic umbrella for both Palestinians and Jews, thus grows. The “Quartet”, composed of the UN, EU, US and Russia has, in the meantime, called once again for a resumption of the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks that have been stalled since Israel’s refusal to stop the construction of settlements and negotiate in good faith. The Quartet, however, has no credibility in the region and basically represents what many see as the willful failure of the US-led international community. This attempt to re-launch the formal negotiation process, even within the context of the Arab uprisings, has once again failed amidst unprecedented pessimism about the prospects for peace: Palestinians continue to live under unprecedented harsh occupation conditions, with Gaza under unlawful blockade since 2007, and Israeli settlement construction continues unabated in occupied Palestinian territory, including in East Jerusalem. Indeed, the US vetoed an otherwise unanimous SC resolution (supported by the EU) in February 2011 calling on Israel to stop such settlements.

The low average Survey mean reflects the overall caution respondents have regarding the implications that a Palestinian UN membership could have for the Arab-Israeli dynamic, and in particular for Palestinian-Israeli relations. Only Maghreb countries (especially Morocco and Algeria) and Turkey expressed relatively positive attitudes, as could have been expected given, on the one hand, the physical and geopolitical distance of the Maghreb from Palestine/Israel and, on the other, Turkey’s then role as a potentially influential regional mediator.

Graph 1: Assessment of the implications of the Palestinian application for UN membership on the Arab-Israeli conflict dynamics

(average on a scale of 0-10, where 0 stands for very negative and 10 for very positive)

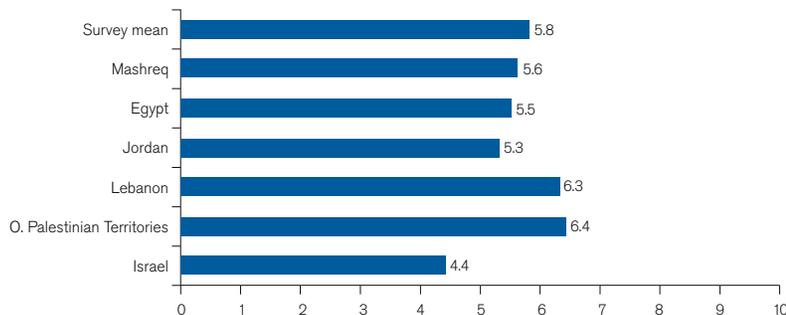


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

Mashreq countries and Israel were much more pessimistic about the impact of a Palestinian UN membership on the Arab-Israeli dynamics. Given its official hostility to the UN bid and its general sense of insecurity, it comes as no surprise that Israel has the lowest assessment, but it is interesting to note that the states having signed peace agreements with Israel (Egypt, Jordan and the OPT) were almost as pessimistic, as this reflects the clear popular discontent with these deals (and thus with international agreements in general involving Israel), which were largely perceived as benefiting only Israel to the detriment of the Arab people's interests. It should be noted that Lebanese respondents had a relatively optimistic view, probably reflecting both a sense of continuing political triumph over Israel – which was forced to withdraw from southern Lebanon under fire, the only such case in the Arab-Israeli conflict – as well as a hope that the problem of Palestinian refugees could be finally resolved in a just manner. Overall, EU and Mediterranean Partner Countries were much more positive in their assessments of a Palestinian UN membership than the rest of the EU countries and, especially, of the European non-EU states, which registered the lowest grade of all Survey regional groupings.

Assessment of the implications of the Palestinian application for UN membership on the Arab-Israeli conflict dynamics

(average on a scale of 0-10, where 0 stands for very negative and 10 for very positive)

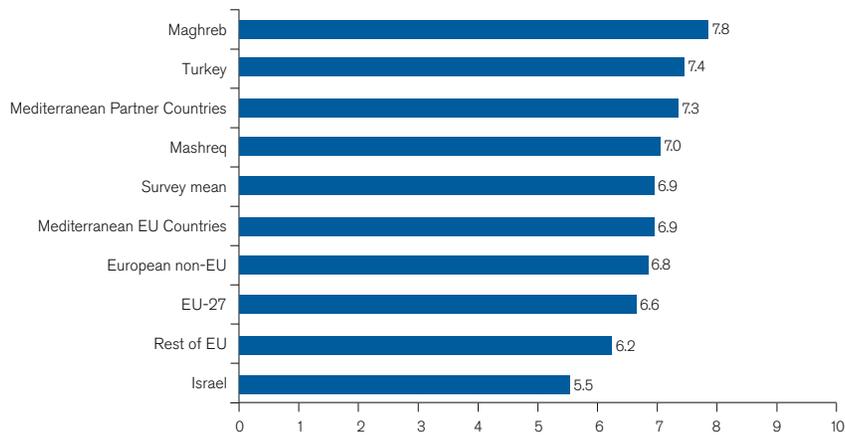


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

The Survey results reveal a clearly more positive view concerning the implications of UN membership on Euromed relations. Israel had by far the lowest grade, followed by Jordan, but the remaining Mashreq, Mediterranean Partner Countries, and particularly Maghreb countries were generally positive, at least in relative terms. The same is true for the EU and non-EU European countries. This relative positive outlook (with the exception of Israel) reflects the clear synergies that exist across the Euromed spectrum in cultural, historical and economic ties. There is little doubt that a natural community exists among these countries, particularly in the Mediterranean, but also that the Arab-Israeli conflict, and particularly the continued Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and its expansion of colonies, has held back this community's potential for collaboration. The problem of Israel has, in this sense, held back the progress of an otherwise natural community within the Mediterranean between Arabs and Europeans. Against this background, Palestinian membership at the UN would be considered as a sign that the international community is, indeed, serious about resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, which would in turn have positive implications for Euromed relations.

Graph 3: Assessment of the implications of the Palestinian application for UN membership on the Euro-Mediterranean relations

(average on a scale of 0-10, where 0 stands for very negative and 10 for very positive)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey