

**PALESTINE, THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS:  
WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE EUROPE?***Pol Morillas\**

The bid for recognition presented by the President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas at the United Nations General Assembly last week represented a diplomatic testing ground for traditional stakeholders in the Middle East Peace Process.

Abbas's application for statehood at the UN came after failed international efforts to upgrade the status of Palestine from an observer entity to a non-member observer state. At the time of writing, the outcome of negotiations at the United Nations Security Council when considering the Palestinian demand is still unclear. Regardless of whether the necessary 9 votes to start the voting process are secured, and thus the US is forced to exercise its veto, Abbas' tour de force at the UN has altered the diplomatic position of the United States, Europe and other major powers in the peace process.

The United States and its President, Barack Obama, have lost ground as deal brokers of the Arab-Israeli conflict. American diplomats have not convinced Abbas that renewed peace talks with the Israelis are the only way to achieve peace in the region. Speaking to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee – the most powerful Israeli lobby in the US – in May 2011, Obama acknowledged that the Palestinian's position and their bringing the issue to the UN were driven by "impatience with the peace process, or the absence of one." By adopting a "there's not much else I can do" attitude, Obama made it clear that resuming the peace negotiations was clearly in Israel's and Palestine's hands. At the UN, the President of the United States stated that "ultimately, it is the Israelis and the Palestinians – not us – who must reach agreement on the issues that divide them" and that there is no short cut to ending a protracted conflict such as the Israeli-Palestinian.

The end of an American-centric position in the negotiations has profound roots. On the one hand, there is of course the lack of progress on the ground that would make the parties come closer for renewed peace talks. While Israel argues that there is no peace process as long as one party goes

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its own way, the Palestinian leadership has seen no internal or external motivation to withdraw its bid for statehood. Abbas' lack of popularity within his internal constituencies and Israel's refusal to stop settlement activities have reinforced a status quo situation by which the parties have no interest in resuming the peace negotiations, paralysed for the last two and a half years.

But there are also powerful internal considerations that Obama is taking into account with regard to the Middle East peace architecture. One year ahead of his re-election campaign, he has his hands tied by the prospect of Jewish voters not giving him support in key states such as Florida and Pennsylvania. Highly polarised and confrontational politics in the Congress have also led the Republican majority to threaten a decrease in US aid to the Palestinians as a consequence of Abbas' bid for a seat at the UN. The chairwoman of the Congress Foreign Affairs Committee, Republican Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, has gone as far as making US funding of UN agencies conditional on the outcome of the UN's vote on Palestine's statehood.

Obama himself has found it difficult to bridge the gap between his promises on Middle East peace and the policies he has been capable of carrying forward. His Cairo speech of 2009, his appearance at the UN General Assembly last year and his foreign policy statement after the Arab Spring all called for the establishment of a Palestinian state living peacefully side by side with Israel. His endorsement of the 1967 borders as the basis for negotiations of a future peace agreement and land swaps was particularly ground-breaking. Lack of progress in peace talks has thus frustrated many in the region and the President himself, as he admitted in his speech at the UN General Assembly.

As Washington politics and regional developments have hindered Obama's room for manoeuvre, European representatives have been placed at the centre of diplomatic action at the UN. Ever since the President of the Palestinian Authority announced his intentions, diplomatic pressure has sought to bring European countries closer to Israeli or Palestinian positions.

In New York, the EU has used the Middle East Quartet, also formed by the UN, the US and Russia, to jump-start peace talks and avoid Abbas' bid for statehood. The EU's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, has used her most preferred "quiet diplomacy" tools to work behind the scenes and propose an alternative to Palestine's full membership, which would have granted Palestine an observer state status at the General Assembly and set out the timetable and terms of future negotiations. The Quartet has ended up adopting a six-point agenda concluding in 2012 with the signing of a peace agreement between the parties.

Individual European countries have also taken a leading role. French President Nicolas Sarkozy reacted against the stalemate generated by Abbas' determination to request statehood and Obama's intention to veto it. At the General Assembly podium, Sarkozy suggested a middle road that would upgrade the status of Palestine to a non-member state and establish a one year timeline to reach a definitive peace agreement between the parties, similar to the agreement reached at the Quartet.

But where will these mediation efforts leave Europe once the diplomatic activity at the UN is over and the Security Council debates Palestine's request for membership?

Had Abbas accepted a non-member observer status, it is still possible that European countries would have voted in opposite directions at the UN General Assembly. EU member states hold important non-conciliatory foreign policy positions regarding the Middle East Peace Process. Internal negotiations on the EU's stance in the conflict have traditionally confronted a pro-Israeli block formed by Germany, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands, among others, and another one sympathetic to Palestine's aspirations with countries such as France, Sweden, Portugal and Spain.

Despite the internal schism, the EU has managed to put forward diplomatic milestones that have shaped the international community's involvement in the Middle East Peace Process. At the Foreign Affairs Council meeting of December 2009, EU ministers agreed that the "EU will not recognise any changes to the pre-1967 borders including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those agreed with the parties." This position was lately adopted by Barack Obama at his Arab Spring speech in May 2011, to which the Israeli leadership reacted harshly stating that a Palestinian state could not be established "at the expense of Israeli existence" withdrawing to the "indefensible" 1967 borders. Yet it seems that any acceptable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will take 1967 borders with agreed land swaps as the basis for negotiations.

Europeans also represent legitimacy and exercise moral influence over both parties. The diplomatic rapprochement to European representatives exercised by Israelis and Palestinians ahead of the UN General Assembly has upgraded Europe's role as a key player in this international forum. The US hands tied position has also revealed prospects for Europe to become a decisive and not only an accompanying actor in the Middle East peace building architecture.

From now on, the EU will face outstanding challenges to keep the diplomatic centrality granted at the General Assembly's negotiations. It will need to demonstrate with action that its promises with regard to the Arab Spring and the Middle East Peace Process respond to a long-term strategy of democracy promotion, human rights protection and state-building. Also, if the US Congress ends

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up reducing aid to the Palestinian Authority as a result of its bid for statehood, the EU will need to hold its position as the largest donor in Palestine in the midst of a severe economic crisis.

European countries will also need to redouble efforts to promote a consistent EU position and back the new diplomatic structures of the European External Action Service. Catherine Ashton has scored some points by being at the heart of Middle East mediations in the Quartet. As noted by her predecessor in the post, Javier Solana, in a joint op-ed with former President of Finland Martti Ahtisaari advocating a European “yes” at the UN “it is not often that Europe has the chance to play a pivotal role on the world stage.”

Negotiations at the UN Security Council provide the four European members (France and the United Kingdom as permanent members and Germany and Portugal as non-permanent members) with the opportunity to speak on behalf of Europe if their messages are consistent and respond to previous agreements at the EU level. This would certainly be a step in the right direction to consolidate Europe’s pivotal international role.

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