



Arab Spectators

THE DECISION BY PALESTINIAN Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to request full UN membership for the State of Palestine, in the face of US pressure to desist, accompanied by the threat of an American veto in the Security Council and a funding cutoff by the US Congress, was a watershed moment for the 76-year-old Palestinian leader.

Notwithstanding his key role in negotiating the Oslo Accords and his presence on the White House lawn that promising September day 18 years ago, and despite his election to the presidency of the Palestinian Authority in 2005, Abbas has never been a politician who generated excitement among the Palestinian and Arab publics.

His latest move, however, coming after years of negotiations with Israel and dialogues with Washington that failed to produce results, has won him considerable kudos among the Palestinian public in the West Bank, and even some in the normally critical international Arab press as well.

In contrast to the anticipation and excitement in Ramallah and New York, in neighboring Arab countries official and popular responses to the Palestinian initiative have been tepid. To be sure, this was not because of a lack of interest. Reliable public opinion polls consistently show that the Palestinian issue is central to shaping the Arab public's overall worldview, and its anger is especially palpable during violent Israeli-Palestinian confrontations.

Rather, the non-response can be explained by at least three factors: 1) most Arab governments and societies are consumed with issues closer to home, especially following the upheavals of the Arab Spring; 2) the UN process, whatever direction it ultimately takes, was viewed by many with a jaundiced eye, as one unlikely to produce real change on the ground; and 3) the political cohesiveness and collective weight of the Arab states is at a historic low, essentially rendering them as spectators, with little influence on the outcome of the proceedings, let alone the diplomatic process.

The dynamics of Palestinian-Arab state relations has always been complicated. Beginning in the mid-1930s, the Palestine problem was regionalized and Arab states gradually supplanted the divided Palestinian leadership in promoting the cause of an Arab Palestine, culminating in their collective military failure in 1948. The revival of the Palestinian cause in the 1960s became bound up with fierce inter-Arab rivalries. In the aftermath of an even worse collective Arab military defeat in 1967, a transformed PLO, led by Yasser Arafat, rose like a phoenix to champion the Palestinian cause.

Achieving the cherished goal of "independence of decision-making," even while being heavily dependent on Arab patron states for material and political support, was no small task, and the PLO repeatedly came out on the short end of confrontations with various Arab states. Gradually, however, the PLO managed to carve out a degree of autonomy for itself, building on the 1974 Arab League recognition of the PLO as the "sole legitimate representative" of the Palestinian people and its embrace by Third World and East Bloc countries and Western leftist circles.

By the early 1990s, most Arab states were committed to a



diplomatic resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict that would include the establishment of an independent Palestinian state responsible for itself. Although neither Syria nor Jordan were enamored with it, Arafat had achieved sufficient strength to sign the Oslo Accords with Israel and establish the Palestinian Authority in portions of the West Bank and Gaza. However, when push came to shove in the summer and fall of 2000, the Arab states took a hands-off

approach to Arafat's crucial negotiations with Israel. They failed to provide crucial political support for the compromises he was being asked to make, and the dynamics of the second intifada took over.

The 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which grew out of Saudi and Jordanian efforts, is frequently referred to as an important positive factor for peace-making efforts, as it puts a collective Arab stamp on the long-elusive diplomatic settlement. It provides more explicit collective recognition of Israel's right to exist than ever before, although the language on refugee return remains problematic. As a reference point, the API has continuing value. But Arab states, divided as they were and consumed with other issues, were never willing nor able to translate the API into the basis for sustained collective diplomacy to advance an Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Complicating matters even further has been the rise of Hamas and Hizballah as important non-state actors who refuse to accept the API's principles.

Abbas's decision to go to the UN put the Palestinian issue back on the collective Arab radar screen. An Arab League foreign ministers' meeting basically gave him *carte blanche* with hardly any discussion to pursue whatever strategy he saw fit. This barely masked Jordanian and Saudi concern over what may ensue. Amman fears renewed Palestinian-Israeli violence, which could directly impinge on its own security. One Saudi official declared that a US veto would cause serious damage to US-Arab relations. Indeed, Obama's speech to the UN General Assembly drew more reaction (uniformly negative) among Arab commentators than Abbas's own speech.

There is any number of possible scenarios for the coming months. At present, Arab states are keenly watching the US and European diplomatic maneuvers. Should there be another eruption of Israeli-Palestinian violence, Arab governments, now more attuned than ever to public pressure and sentiment, are likely to play to the gallery, while seeking sustained international pressure on Israel, presumably in concert with the new kid on the block, Turkey. •

The author is the Marcia Israel Principal Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University.