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Palestinians Imposing Agenda on Abbas

By: Leila Farsakh · November, 2012

Overview

Palestinian demonstrators at home and initiatives by Palestinians worldwide have imposed a different discourse on the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Palestinian Authority (PA), as revealed by the evolution of PLO Chairman Mahmoud Abbas' speeches to the United Nations General Assembly between 2011 and 2012. With Abbas heading back to the UN to seek Observer State status for Palestine this month, Al-Shabaka Policy Advisor Leila Farsakh analyzes the evolution of Palestinian civil society demands and the attempts by the PA to accommodate their political message while keeping control of the content of the Palestinian political project and the future of the Palestinian political struggle.

Palestinian Civil Society's Agenda

The Arab uprisings emboldened a new language of politics in the Middle East, one that prioritizes the rights of citizens to freedom and dignity. Although the power of this language has been diluted with the violence in Libya and then Syria, it is still strong among activists determined to defend their right to hold their governments accountable. Among Palestinians living under Israel's prolonged and brutal occupation, the Arab uprisings sparked an ongoing struggle between the youth and other sectors of the population on the one hand and the political leadership

and elites on the other. Each side is seeking to define the parameters of what constitutes "rights" in the Palestinian context and how best to protect them.

Palestinians living in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) went to the streets as early as February 2011 in support of the Egyptian revolution. What soon became known as the March 15 movement included youth groups, independent politicians, and numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs.) At that time their main demand was an end to the division between Fatah and Hamas that has since 2007 kept the former in control of the West Bank and the latter of Gaza. Yet the various reconciliation agreements signed by Fatah and Hamas failed to produce national unity and each party continued to consolidate its turf while further alienating the population.

Palestinians in the OPT continued to go to the streets, reinvigorating and giving greater visibility to a growing non-violent protest movement based on the work of various civil society groups such as Stop the Wall Campaign, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, human rights NGOs, women's associations, and prisoner support groups as well as trade unions, independent politicians and parties. Whether demonstrating at Al-Muqata'a (the seat of the PA,) marching towards Kalandia, campaigning on social media, or striking against increases in food prices, Palestinian protestors have since May 2011 focused on three key issues they want the Palestinian leadership to address.

First, they are calling for the protection of Palestinian national rights. These, in their view, do not simply include the right to a state but above all the right of return, freedom, and equality. This was most evident during the anniversary of the Nakba (catastrophe) marking Israel's creation on 15 May 2011 when Palestinian youth together with Stop the Wall Campaign, the Palestinian NGO network (PNGO) and the popular committees in various West Bank villages organized demonstrations along major checkpoints and along Israel's Separation Wall to reaffirm the Palestinian right of return. They also coordinated with Palestinians

inside Israel, who staged remembrance days in a number of the 1948 destroyed villages. In a non-hierarchical fashion, and through the use of social media, they joined forces with youth groups in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon seeking to enter Israel through the borders of those countries to affirm their right of return and assert the centrality of the right of return in popular activism.

The second demand is a call for new elections and resumption of the democratic process in the Palestinian polity at large. Indeed, this demand is not confined to new elections for the PA presidency or the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) in the West Bank and Gaza. Al Herak al Shababi (youth movement,) Palestinians for Dignity, Gaza Youth, and other youth groups, have specifically called for new elections to the Palestinian National Council (PNC) of the PLO, which represents Palestinians in the OPT and the diaspora as well as the Palestinian citizens of Israel. Since 1988, when it formally adopted the two-state program, the PNC has been politically marginalized by the Oslo peace process.

The demand by the youth movement in the OPT for the reinvigoration of the PNC joins that made by various Palestinian groups in the Diaspora over the years, which have been working on creating cross-border coalitions in an attempt to reunify the Palestinian body politic that the Oslo peace process fragmented. It is also an attempt to reactivate the democratic processes from the bottom up and give voice to the various Palestinian constituencies that Oslo silenced.

The third demand of Palestinian activists in the OPT is an end to the Oslo peace process and to cooperation with Israel. Palestinian youth from Al Herak and Palestinians for dignity, among others, demonstrated against the indirect talks between Israeli and Palestinian officials in Amman in early 2012 (see Al Herak al Shababi's Facebook page.) They also staged protests against a joint meeting of Israeli-Palestinian peace activists in Jerusalem and Ramallah in January 2012, and called for resistance to normalization efforts until Palestinian rights were secured. Many activists and intellectuals went so far as to call for the PA to be dismantled

given Oslo's failure to bring about independence and the futility of reaching an agreement with an Israeli government focused on colonization and dispossession. Since the summer of 2012, Palestinians have demonstrated against the PA's austerity measures and against Oslo's Paris Protocol.

In the Palestinian context, thus, the Arab uprisings, while not leading to the toppling of the PA, have emboldened popular demand to end the Oslo peace process and with it the two-state solution. Palestinian activists are emphasizing the rights-based discourse of the BDS Campaign launched by over 170 civil society organizations in 2005, which spelled out fundamental Palestinian rights as self-determination, an end to occupation, the right of return and the right of the Palestinian citizens of Israel to equality. In short, Palestinian activists today are reframing the Palestinian struggle as one of fighting against an apartheid Israeli regime and for inalienable Palestinian rights, not for a state per se.

Abbas & the PA Respond

The PA's decision to seek UN membership for the Palestinian State declared by the PNC in 1988 can be read as an attempt not only to bypass the stalemate in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations but also to meet the people's protests against the Oslo peace agreements and dissatisfaction with Fatah's and Hamas' rule. Comparing Abbas's 2012 speech to the UN General Assembly with the one he presented in 2011 reveals the extent to which the PA has been trying to accommodate the demonstrators' language and demands while attempting to control the content of the political protests as well as the terms of the debate about what constitutes "rights" in the Palestinian context.

In 2011, the PLO submitted a request for full UN membership for the State of Palestine to the Security Council, a strategy that failed because the Palestinian request did not gather the nine votes necessary due to active opposition by the United States. In 2012, Abbas is submitting a request for non-member Observer

State status to the General Assembly, which would upgrade the PLO's present status of permanent observer and put it on a par with the Vatican. Such an upgrade could allow the State of Palestine to become member of the International Criminal Court, potentially enabling the PLO to pursue claims of war crimes and other violations against Israel. The new status would not of course define the boundaries of the State of Palestine, its relationship to the PLO, the means by which the occupation will end, or the way the right of return would be realized.

In both of his UN speeches in 2011 and 2012, Abbas sought to stamp the Palestinian "spring" with the quest for statehood and independence and deflect the challenge to the PA and demands for democracy. "At a time when the Arab people affirm their quest for democracy – the Arab Spring – the time is now for the Palestinian Spring, the time for Independence", he stated on September 23, 2011. Abbas argued in both in 2011 and 2012 that an independent Palestinian state on 22% of historic Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, would provide relative justice to the injustice created by the Nakba. It would be the price Palestinians would pay to reach peace with Israel and be in accordance with the international consensus, since UN resolution 181, on the partition of Palestine.

He reminded his Palestinian listeners that this state was what the PNC approved in its 1988 declaration of independence, thereby seeking to reassert the national legitimacy of the Palestinian State project. Abbas further affirmed the unity of the Palestinian people that he represented as the head of the PLO, not simply the PA, and emphasized that it was the PLO and not the PA making the UN bid, thus addressing dissent about his prerogative to speak in the name of all Palestinians. He mentioned Palestinian refugees, those under occupation, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and those in the Diaspora. He asserted the right of return under UN resolution 194 as forcefully as the right to equality and freedom, which a state would be well placed to protect.

Both speeches also sought to engage the international community by asking it to

fulfill its responsibility towards the Palestinian people. In fact, the innovative element in Abbas' UN bid is his attempt to re-internationalize the conflict, by bringing back the UN, and thereby shaking, if not ending, U.S. monopoly of the peace process. As he put it in 2011: "We aspire for and seek a greater and more effective role for the United Nations in working to achieve a just and comprehensive peace in our region that ensures the inalienable, legitimate national rights of the Palestinian people." Abbas may thereby be signaling a decision to rely on an international legal strategy to protect Palestinian rights, perhaps not dissimilar from the one used with the International Court of Justice in 2005 against Israel's building of the separation wall inside the West Bank.

However, there is a difference in tone and attitude between the 2011 and 2012 speeches. In the 2012 UN speech, Abbas draws more directly on the discourse used by Palestinian protestors. He describes Israel not simply as "settler colonial" as in 2011, but also as implementing "apartheid" policies and "ethnic cleansing" in East Jerusalem and the rest of the occupied territories, terms he had avoided using up until then. Whereas in 2011, Abbas was still trying to extend his "hand to the Israeli government and the Israeli people for peace making …based on parity and equity between two neighboring states – Palestine and Israel," in 2012 he squarely puts the blame on the Israeli government, which, in his words, "rejects the two states solution" and is " emptying the Oslo accords of their meaning." Israel, he adds, has weakened the PA and "is promising the Palestinians a new catastrophe, a new Nakba."

By so doing, Abbas is responding to popular outrage at Oslo and the futility of negotiating with Israel while the occupation continues and settlements expand. His stronger tone in 2012 reflects also his frustration at Israel's intransigence during the last round of informal negotiations under Jordan's sponsorship in January 2012, in which the PLO participated despite the continuation of settlement construction. At that time Israel reiterated its refusal to share Jerusalem or cede

control over the Jordan Valley, while affirming its intention to annex all major settlements block in the West Bank in any future agreement. The final map and borders that Israel is offering the Palestinian, Abbas informed the UN in 2012, is one of "enclaves …subject to full dominance of military colonial occupation only packaged under new names, such as the unilateral plan for a so-called state with provisional borders."

The 2012 Abbas UN speech also expressed anger towards the international community. Unlike the 2011 speech where Abbas invites the international community to play a role to reignite the peace process, in 2012 he laments that it has allowed Israel to continue "to be permitted to evade accountability and punishment", providing Israel with a de facto "license for the occupation to continue its policy of dispossession and… entrench its system of apartheid against the Palestinian people." He calls upon the international community to uphold its responsibilities and apply UN resolutions to implement a Palestinian state now that the World Bank and IMF have testified to its institutional viability.

Moreover, Abbas mentions for the first time that the only way to reach peace "must first and foremost be predicated on the understanding that racial settler colonization must be condemned, punished and boycotted in order for it to be completely halted." In this respect, he appears to have heard the Palestinian BDS Call, as this goes beyond his reiteration, in 2011, that Palestinians remain commitment to steadfastness and non-violent resistance. It remains to be seen whether this new stand will be translated into a PA strategy to engage the UN in implementing an international boycott campaign against Israel.

Will Observer State Status Make a Difference?

There is skepticism that Abbas' new language can translate into a new political agenda, and Palestinians worldwide greeted his stronger tone with apathy. The recent municipal elections held in the West Bank affirmed the PA's – and Fatah's –

disarray and the rejection of the status quo. And Abbas' recent remarks about the right of return – in which he gave up his right to return to his hometown of Safed – caused a furor.

The PLO is likely to secure Observer State membership at the UN given the majority support it holds in the General Assembly. The question remains as to how the PLO will use this new status. Abbas could conceivably recover his capacity to set the agenda if he takes two steps. First, if he and the PLO respond creatively and forcefully to the expected backlash from the U.S., Israel and their allies to the PLO's upgraded status. And, second, if the PLO does indeed use its enhanced status to follow an effective legal strategy in international forums such as the ICC. By so doing, Abbas would counter Palestinian skepticism given the PLO's neglect of the powerful ICJ Advisory Opinion in the legal arena, as well as its attempts to bury the Goldstone Report,

In all cases, the Palestinian civil society drive for rights is likely to strengthen, both within and outside the OPT, as is the global BDS movement. Palestinians will find new ways to impose the quest for rights on the political agenda. As the PLO sees it, the UN observer state member bid is the last chance for the two-state solution. It would be an ironic twist of fate if its efforts to push for a state instead contribute to a rights-based discourse that propels a movement for a single democratic state of Israel/Palestine in all of mandate Palestine.

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