

The Palestinian Authority's Historic Mistake - and Opportunity

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No one knows the precise plans of the Palestinian Authority vis-a-vis September: will Mahmoud Abbas declare a Palestinian state within recognized borders and ask that it be admitted as a full member of the UN – or not? Perhaps Abbas himself does not know. Now political leaders often make decisions alone or in consultation with a small group of advisors. As in so many matters political, however, the Palestinian leadership finds itself in a unique situation. Its main allies are not governments, and certainly not the American government, whose support for some inexplicable reason has constituted the Palestinians' default position for the past forty years. Rather, the Palestinians' most loyal and powerful ally is civil society. And yet, this most solid base of support remains unappreciated, unutilized and ignored.

Three circles of popular support radiate out into the wider world, able to mobilize millions of people to the Palestinian cause. First, of course, is the Palestinian people itself. Displaced, scattered, oppressed, occupied, struggling for its national rights and very cultural identity, this "little grain of sand," as it has been called, continues generation after generation to jam not only the vaunted Israeli military machine but that of its main supporter, the United States, who for decades has used Israel as its forward position in the Middle East.

To oppressed people everywhere, the Palestinians have become an inspiration, almost their surrogate. Their ability to remain steadfast (*sumud*) is proof that injustice, even when supported by the most advanced weaponry of the most powerful super-powers, can be resisted. But Israel, helped by time and geography, has succeeded in fragmenting the Palestinians. The refugees in the camps are almost completely excluded from political processes, but it is the exclusion of the Diaspora that is especially problematic. Highly educated for the most part, fluent in all the European languages, they could play a major role in promoting the Palestinian cause abroad. Indeed, a few individuals have carved out influential positions despite being excluded, even resisted, by the West Bank leadership. Instead, the Palestinian Authority has fielded, with a couple notable exceptions, a most inept and inarticulate corps of diplomats. Rather than using their greatest asset, their own people abroad as well as the legions of articulate spokespeople at home, including younger people, the Palestinian Authority has tied its own hands diplomatically just when Israel is mounting a major international offensive against it. Just recall one astounding fact: during the entire year that saw the Obama Administration taking office and the invasion of Gaza, there was no official

Palestinian representative in Washington!

The second circle of civil society support for the Palestinian cause is, of course, the Arab and wider Muslim worlds. While each uprising of the "Arab Spring" has its own reasons and dynamics, the Palestinian struggle provided the inspiration. The Arab peoples came to realize that the same forces oppressing the Palestinians – militarism designed to thwart democracy and ensure neo-colonial control over their lands and resources – are at the source of their own oppression as well.

Indeed, the Palestinians possess one source of tremendous clout: they are the bone in the throat of the global powers that prevent them from completing their imperialist plans. The Palestinian struggle is not simply a local one between Palestinians and Israelis; it has become global on the order of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. It cannot be by-passed. Even though there are larger and bloodier conflicts in the Middle East, until the Palestinians signal the rest of the Muslim world that they have arrived at a political settlement with Israel and the time has come to normalize relations, the conflict is not over. A solution cannot be imposed, and the Palestinians are the gatekeepers. Nothing can happen without them, and until the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is indeed resolved, the US and Europe will be unable to pursue their interests unencumbered in an empowered Middle East.

The third circle of civil society just waiting to be mobilized are the millions of ordinary people the world over who have devoted enormous energy and resources towards the realization of Palestinian national rights. The Palestinian struggle has indeed assumed the proportions of that against apartheid. It is one of the two or three leading issues in the world. Churches, trade unions, university students, political and human rights organizations, prominent

intellectuals, performers and even key politicians have all mobilized in support of the BDS movement (boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel). They are evident in the repeated attempts to break the siege of Gaza by sending international flotillas.

But they, like Palestinian civil society and that of the Arab and Muslim worlds, wait to be mobilized by the Palestinian leadership. According to newspaper accounts – unfortunately, the Authority leadership has never conducted an open discussion of the crucial September initiative and has never shared its deliberations – the two main objections to seeking membership in the UN are fear of upsetting the American administration and failure to obtain the required number of votes. The first is ridiculous. Does anyone still believe the Palestinians will gain anything by pursuing American-led “negotiations”

The second objection, that not receiving the required votes for admission to the UN constitutes a “failure,” exposes a key flaw in the strategic thinking of the Palestinian leadership. If Abbas approaches the UN in a docile and half-hearted way, appearing more to be pushed by an Israeli refusal to negotiate than by his people’s own just cause and urgent need for independence, the Palestinian struggle will certainly suffer. Many other countries that would otherwise support the Palestinian initiative will indeed waiver, giving in to US and Israeli pressure because it seems the Palestinian themselves are not serious about it. But if he goes into the UN as the head of a national unity government with the support of the world’s peoples, Mandela-like, he could decisively change the course of events forever.

To pull off his September initiative, Abbas must reject the go-it-alone approach that the Palestinian leadership has followed fruitlessly for so long. He must recognize that civil society the world over – and in the Muslim world and Europe in particular – is the Palestinians’ most important ally. The issue is not whether the initiative “succeeds”; it is clear that the US will cast a veto. The true struggle is to pull out all the stops to show the world just how strong the Palestinian movement is. If mobilized, the collective power of the grass-roots who have for years labored on the Palestinian issue will generate a momentum that will be hard to stop.

Time is of the essence. Mobilization must begin *immediately*. The elected representatives of the Palestinian people in the Occupied Territory, joined for the first time by Palestinians of the refugee camps, inside Israel and the Diaspora, should issue a joint “Call for Support.” Immediately following the Palestinian Call, grass-roots activists would issue a Civil Society Call to support the Palestinian

initiative, which would be signed by tens of thousands of people from all over the world and delivered to the UN in September. If a campaign for public support begins now, if the political leadership works intensively and closely with its own civil society to garner wide-spread support, more than 100,000 people can be gathered at the UN in New York in September in a mass rally for Palestinian independence. (And believe me, Israel will mobilize its own supporters!)

Inside the UN, Abbas would present Palestine’s compelling case for independence and UN membership, as he did in his *New York Times* piece of May 16th. He would also reframe the conflict. It is not specious security issues that lay at the roots of the conflict, but Israel’s refusal to respect Palestinian national rights and to end the Occupation. As he also did in the *New York Times* article, Abbas must also make it clear that recognition of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders in no way compromises the right of refugees to return to their homes, a key point of future negotiations with Israel. He should also state upfront that the establishment of a Palestinian state does not end the Palestinian quest, through peaceful means, of an inclusive single-state solution.

If international mobilization is pursued vigorously and Abbas exudes a genuine determination to see a Palestinian state established and recognized, more than 130 countries, including many of the leading European ones, will vote to accept Palestine into the UN. Even if this does not overrule the US veto in the Security Council, it is far more than a merely symbolic achievement and certainly cannot be considered a failure. Such a massive expression of support would demonstrate the inevitability of Palestinian statehood. It would signal the *beginning* rather than the end of an international campaign for Palestinian rights, one now joined by governments as well as civil society.

We, the people who have pursued Palestinian rights over the decades, Palestinians and non-Palestinian alike, are an integral part of the struggle. We have earned the right, all of us, to have our voices heard in September. Indeed, I would argue that if September comes and goes without any breakthrough due to the acquiescence and weakness of the Authority leadership, civil society support might well dissipate. The people can bring the struggle to a certain point; we cannot negotiate or pursue initiatives at the UN. If the leadership fails us then we truly have nowhere to go. All those Palestinians who have suffered, resisted and died over the past decades cannot be let down at this historic moment by a vacillating political leadership. We call on you to mobilize us. Together we shall succeed, and sooner rather than later.