



**PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN**  
**ASSEMBLEE PARLEMENTAIRE DE LA MEDITERRANEE**  
الجمعية البرلمانية للبحر الأبيض المتوسط

**1<sup>st</sup> Standing Committee on Political and Security related cooperation**

***Ad Hoc* Committee on the Middle East**

Chairman: Hon. George Vella (Malta)

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**I. Regional context – The Arab spring**

1. It has long been stated that the Mediterranean never ceases to astound.

In the short period between our Assembly's V Plenary Session in Rabat, Morocco, last October - where both the Knesset and the Palestinian National Council (PNC) were represented at the highest levels - and today, so much has happened in the Mediterranean that the region is unrecognizable from what it was like six months ago. An unexpected political tsunami has changed completely the political picture in the North of Africa, and is still sweeping across countries in the Gulf and the Middle East, bring about change, creating tensions, raising hopes, and promising better futures. These changes have given a completely new dimension to Mediterranean politics, and brought about dramatic changes in US foreign policy towards the Mediterranean, and a complete rethinking of Euro-Mediterranean relations.

2. This so called "Arab Awakening" has riveted world attention to the region for months now, and for a time it seemed as if the classic "cause célèbre" of instability and tension in the region...the Israeli-Palestinian issue... was somehow "forgotten", especially since the breakdown of peace talks in the fall of 2010 following direct meetings between Israel and Palestine in Washington.

3. However, as has always been stated, in the Mediterranean region, everything is intertwined, and interdependent. The changes in Mediterranean Arab countries, and the change in Arab mentality that allegedly brought these changes about, especially in Egypt, could not but have its effect also on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

4. By the third week of January, the uprising of Tunisian Arab youth had started, and the turmoil in Arab countries had begun. During the second week of February, Baroness Catherine Ashton, addressing the UN Security Council, emphasized the fact that in view of the upheavals in the Arab World, it was more urgent than ever to make progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, while declaring that it was impossible to predict how the flux and popular revolt taking place across the Arab World would alter the situation. She declared that she believed that reaching Israeli-Palestinian peace by September was still possible.

## **II. Towards inter-Palestinian reconciliation**

5. After the breakdown of talks between the Israeli and the Palestinian sides in Washington, because of Israel's determination to carry on with its settlement policy, and its reluctance to extend the moratorium previously agreed upon, beyond the 26<sup>th</sup> September cut-off date, in spite of exhortations by European Union Ministers, and the Quartet itself, and the international community at large, continued discussions with the Palestinians were severely compromised.

6. The reconciliation between the two Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas, was long in the making, but was pleasantly surprising when it was announced in mid-April. The "Cairo reconciliation agreement" was officially endorsed on 4 May 2011 by several other Palestinian political factions (including Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Palestinian People's Party) and paves the way for a joint interim government ahead of general elections for both parliament and the PA presidency in early 2012. Earlier in February, and surfing on the winds of political change in the region, PA President Mahmoud Abbas, had called for presidential and legislative elections to be held before September but this was rejected by Hamas at the time. The Cairo agreement specifies that elections will be held in 2012.

7. This agreement was followed by an announcement that reconciliation had taken a further step forward on 29 May 2011 while the leaders of Fatah and Hamas were hosted in Moscow and signed a joint "Declaration of Unity" without revealing its full content.

## **III. The Gaza strip: towards the end of the blockade**

8. Since June 2007 the Gaza strip has suffered a total land air and sea blockade on its borders with Israel and Egypt. The move came as retaliation following the victory of Hamas in the 2006 legislative elections and its break away from a power-sharing agreement embedded in the Palestinian authority national unity government formed in March 2007.

9. While PAM MPs were allowed to enter Gaza in May 2009 for a fact-finding mission in the aftermath of the Israeli military “Operation Cast Lead” (27 December 2008 -18 January 2009) a delegation of Members of the European Parliament were refused entry in December 2009, even though French and Spanish Foreign Ministers, Kouchner and Moratinos, met Israeli Foreign Minister Liebermann in Jerusalem, and the EU Commissioner for enlargement and neighbourhood policy Stefan Fule, visited Israel and Ramallah.

10. The UN sent a fact-finding mission headed by Richard Goldstone on the Gaza conflict. The mission was of the view that Israel continues to be duty-bound under the Fourth Geneva Convention and to the full extent of the means available to it to ensure the supply of foodstuff, medical and hospital items and other goods to meet the humanitarian needs of the population of the Gaza Strip without qualification and it recommended that Israel should immediately cease the border closures and restrictions on passage through border crossings with the Gaza Strip.

11. When allowed in Gaza on 27 May 2010, a visiting delegation of MEPs described the situation as “shocking to see the suffering of the people of Gaza, where 750,000 people depend on aid provided by UNWRA, and 300,000 are in utter destitution”. Since then, and with raising concerns over incidents such as the Gaza humanitarian flotilla on 31 May 2010, the international community at large - and Foreign Ministers from the region- repeatedly recommended the opening up of all Gaza crossings so that economic activity may resume.

12. The lack of progress with regard to peace talks, the decision by Israel to go-ahead with its settlement policy and the Gaza blockade contributed in no small way to the decision to postpone indefinitely planned Summits of Heads of States of the stillborn Union for the Mediterranean first scheduled for June 2010 and then November 2010.

13. On a more reassuring note the holding of an EU-Africa Summit in Tripoli in late November, which discussed bilateral relations including peace, security, democracy, human rights, trade, infrastructure, energy, immigration and employment, was a very positive development. Maybe as a reaction to this, Israel promised to relax restrictions to the movement of goods to and from Gaza, especially farm produce; a promise which was not fully implemented. Meanwhile, on 25 May 2011, the transitional military government of Egypt announced that it would reopen the Rafah crossing into Gaza from 28 May with the exceptions of Fridays and public holidays.

#### **IV. Palestine: towards official recognition in late 2011?**

14. Faced with Israel’s continued reluctance to heed calls to freeze settlements in the West Bank and East-Jerusalem, Palestinian President Abbas threatened to dissolve the Palestinian Authority, thus placing Israel before its responsibilities as an “occupying power”.

15. European opinion on this whole issue, could be reflected in the initiative taken in December 2010 by 26 leading Europeans, including personalities like Javier Solana, Romano Prodi, Felipe Gonzales, Richard von Weizacher, who called for the EU to impose sanctions on Israel, because of its continued settlement building in defiance of international law. They also called for the creation of a Palestinian State in the United Nations, if there is no progress in peace talks by April 2011. Needless to say, this declaration was greeted with interest by the Palestinians.

16. On 13<sup>th</sup> December 2010, the EU Ministers continued to reaffirm the conclusions of the December 2009 Council, where it was stated that: “the EU will not recognize any changes to the pre-1967 borders, including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those agreed by the parties”. This statement was “noted with pleasure” by Arab Foreign Ministers meeting in Cairo a few days later, where they declared Israeli settlement policy as “ illegal and counterproductive”, and appealed to the US not to use any more its veto in the United Nations Security Council on this matter.

17. In spite of stalled talks, the EU released a tranche of 100 million Euro to the Palestinian Authority, aimed to help in the building of a democratic and viable Palestinian State, in the belief that “Palestinian statehood is critical for any peaceful, workable, and lasting solution to the conflict”.

18. In spite of Baroness Catherine Ashton visiting the Middle East, in the first days of January, a few days later, the EU and Israel were involved in a heated exchange over the demolition of the Shepherd Hotel, and the planned construction of new illegal settlements in East-Jerusalem.

19. Against this background the Palestinian Authority was busy gathering support for its proposal to call for the official recognition of the State of Palestine, in the United Nations General Assembly in September.

20. The Palestinian Authority contends that international recognition would put political and legal pressure on Israel to withdraw its forces from the occupied territories. The EU reacted by stating that: “We believe that a negotiated solution is the only one that has a long term prospect of bringing peace, security, and stability to the region”. Equally skeptical was the US when Washington declared that “Any unilateral action is counterproductive”.

21. The Quartet also wanted a negotiated settlement by September, but were in disagreement among themselves on how talks should resume on all key issues including borders and security. The Israeli Prime minister was meanwhile canvassing heads of important states to win support for continued Israeli military presence in the Jordan valley in a future peace agreement with the

Palestinians. It was rumoured that B. Nethanyahu was soon to announce a new diplomatic move to negotiate a long-term “interim agreement” with the Palestinians without ending the Israeli settlement programme, rather than negotiating a final settlement. It was leaked that B. Nethanyahu would agree to a State of Palestine with provisional borders, and the expansion of autonomous Palestinian areas on the West Bank. Needless to say the Palestinians made it clear they would reject such proposals, and reiterated they wanted the complete cessation of the settlement programme.

22. It was about this time in mid-February that ‘Wikileaks’ revelations led to the winding up of the Negotiations Support Unit, and the resignation of chief negotiator Saeb Erakat...an unfathomable loss for the Palestinian side of such a seasoned diplomat and shrewd negotiator.

23. Also at this time Palestinian Prime Minister Fayyad tendered his Government’s resignation. He was eventually asked by President Abbas to appoint a new Cabinet, whose focus was to be the “mobilization of the energy of Palestinians to support national institutions with the aim of quickly establishing a Palestinian State by September”.

24. Under such conditions it is no wonder that violence started to raise its head again, and we witnessed terrorist attacks in Jerusalem and Gaza, while mortar and rocket attacks out of Gaza increased.

25. At the end of March 2011, the Palestinian Authority, reiterated its full commitment to the full implementation of the recommendations of the Goldstone Commission report, and called on the European Union to engage in the UN General Assembly on the Goldstone report following the resolution adopted at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva a week earlier. Catherine Ashton was unequivocal in her criticism of further Israeli settlement activities in Gilo (East Jerusalem), Mount Scopus slopes, Har Homa and in Pisgat Ze’ev.

26. The kidnapping and killing of the Italian activist Vittorio Arrigoni in Gaza by a Salafist group, was an open act of defiance and a challenge to the Hamas in Gaza, by a more radical Islamic group, and sent shock waves to observers of the region.

27. Amidst all this turmoil in the Arab countries, and a sense of irreversible stalemate in Israeli- Palestinian relations, the news of an agreement between the two Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas, came as a refreshing energizing shower over the scorching desertland.

28. As expected, the immediate reactions of Netanyahu and Liebermann to this, long awaited, but unexpected announcement of an Inter-Palestinian agreement, were very negative and also include threats of the use of “a vast arsenal of measures” against the Palestinians because according to them a “red line” had been crossed by the agreement.

29. Washington was cautious and called on any future Palestinian government to renounce violence, to recognize Israel's right to exist, and to respect past agreements reached between Israel and the Palestinians. The US, on the other hand, was categorical in declaring it will not deal with a Palestinian Government that includes Hamas, unless the Islamist group reforms itself. In a speech before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) on 22 May 2011, President Obama declared, that: "No vote at the United Nations will ever create an independent Palestinian State. And the United States will stand up against efforts to single Israel out at the United Nations or in any international forum".

30. Meanwhile pressure was put on the European Union to support the Fatah-Hamas agreement. The EU 27 members could not easily and quickly reach the necessary consensus for backing the Palestinian agreement, due to the clear cut positions taken by Israel, and the US against Hamas involvement in any future government formation, given that up to now the EU still regards Hamas as a terrorist organization, and Hamas still denounces Israel's right to exist.

31. Under these circumstances it is worth noting that the European Parliament delegation for relations with the Palestinian Legislative Council, has taken a position in favour of the Palestinian reconciliation agreement, as long as a future Palestinian government renounces violence, and recognize Israel.

32. In London and in Paris, Netanyahu made it clear that Israel will not accept any Hamas Islamists in any future Palestinian National Unity government, and as a retaliatory measure he suspended the transfer of taxes and customs duties levied on goods transiting through its ports and airports towards Palestinian territories.

33. In spite of these 'fire and brimstone' threats from the Israeli side, Fatah and Hamas, represented by Mahmoud Abbas and Khaled Meshal, signed an Inter-Palestinian reconciliation agreement in Cairo, after years of tireless diplomatic efforts by the Egyptian Foreign Ministry to bring the two sides together again. It was made clear that there is an understanding that a future Palestinian government must subscribe to the principle of non violence, and support the 'two state solution' policy, implicitly meaning recognising Israel's right to exist. The agreement was to bring about institutional consolidation between the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank, by having one institution, one President, and one Prime Minister.

34. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon noted that: "Palestinian Unity is a process which is just beginning now, and thus it would be best to assist it as it moves forwards".

35. The situation at present is that the EU is still studying the details of the signed agreement before pronouncing itself definitively. A unified position is difficult to achieve. For example Angela Merkel has already said that because of the special relationship of her country with Israel, she would not support any recognition of a Palestinian state in the UN were the occasion

to arise in September. To date, EU Member States are split on the issue of recognition of a Palestinian State at the UNGA.

## **V. A changing regional chessboard: opportunities for peace**

36. Against this background, the situation on the ground is crying out loud for an immediate solution. The situation of Palestinians living in East-Jerusalem is pathetic and humiliating. They have to face hardships they are made to endure due to blatant discrimination in access to government services they are entitled to, such as free education, and residency rights. The Judeisation of Palestinian territories, especially East-Jerusalem is proceeding unabated.

37. The people in Gaza were already aspiring for better times in view of hopes that a future Egyptian government, possibly under the influence the Muslim Brotherhood could have in its formation, would be more tolerant to Hamas, and would ease the frontier restrictions between Gaza and Egypt, which the Mubarak regime observed rigorously.

38. The signing of the Fatah-Hamas agreement, gave the people of Gaza new hopes for the future, and explains the jubilation and the celebrations that accompanied the announcement of this agreement in the besieged strip of Palestinian territory.

39. Besides the Israeli siege, the people of Gaza, over the last four years, had been subjected to quasi total suppression of all forms of political and civil expression that did not follow the policy of Hamas.

40. The deal was particularly welcomed by the tens of thousands of Palestinians who on March 15<sup>th</sup> took to the streets of the West Bank and Gaza to demand the two sides work together towards a unity government, and overcome their differences.

41. It is amply clear that the developments in the Arab World, and most importantly the regime changes in Egypt, as well as the failure in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, played a pivotal part in bringing about this sea change in inter-Palestinian relations. The evolving situation in neighboring Syria was also bound to impact inter-Palestinian relations.

42. This Egyptian brokered deal revives hope of ending the bitter infighting that weakened the Palestinian people politically in their dealings with Israel. The deal envisages the formation of a single caretaker Palestinian government that would administer day to day business until new presidential and legislative elections are held in a year's time. It promises the new government to be apolitical and focus on rebuilding Gaza and make the necessary arrangements for elections. The deal also calls for the establishment of a joint high security council to begin work straight

away on restructuring and rendering more professional the security forces, to be more effective and efficient following elections.

## **VI. The 1967 borders: a key obstacle to overcome for a negotiation towards lasting peace**

43. While the world waits with bated breath to learn more about the deal, and while sympathetic political analysts hope that all the necessary measures to make the deal work are eventually adopted, the US President on May 19<sup>th</sup> made important pronouncements on US Middle East policy. President Obama in his speech dealt mostly with the issues of territory and security.

44. He warned that for the Palestinians, efforts to delegitimise Israel will end in failure. He said that: “Symbolic actions to isolate Israel at the UN in September won’t create an independent state”, and warned also that: “Palestinian leaders will not achieve peace and prosperity if Hamas insists on a path of terror and rejection”, adding that: “Palestinians will never realize their independence by denying the right of Israel to exist”. At the same time he declared that the dream of a Jewish and democratic state cannot be fulfilled with permanent occupation.

45. In that speech, President Obama declared clearly that peace means “two states for two peoples”, stating unequivocally that “the borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps”. As expected the US President did not mince his words in declaring his country’s “unshakeable commitment to Israel’s security”. He also reflected on the issue as to how, following the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement, Israel was expected to negotiate with a party that officially has shown itself unwilling to recognize Israel’s right to exist. As with other problems across the region, Obama reminded that solutions depended heavily on a choice that had to be made...a choice between hate and hope, between the shackles of the past, and the promise of the future.

46. It is sad to note that practically within hours, the Israeli PM Netanyahu, in person at the Oval Office in the White House, told President Obama, in front of the world press, that he disagreed with his proposals, that the pre-1967 borders should be the basis for any future agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. He was also categorical in stating that Israel will have nothing to do with any Palestinian government which includes Hamas. Today, disagreements over borders issue remain a key obstacle to lasting peace.

## **VII. PAM’ involvement**

47. Developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict unfold on a regular basis. As on many other occasions in this unending process, we have once more come to an important crossroad.



The present situation presents both parties, and the international community, with opportunities at peace making, which are not to be missed.

48. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) sees in the present situation, many elements, that, if properly dealt, with could provide a solid basis for a just and durable solution to the Israeli conflict...provided, and this is a very important proviso, that there is Goodwill from both sides.

49. PAM exhorts the Palestinian side to ensure that Fatah and Hamas work together in unison, forgetting the past, and looking with hope towards the future. PAM expects the Palestinian side to come up with assurances that Hamas renounce violence, and that they recognize Israel's right to exist, either directly, or indirectly by accepting to comply with the "two state solution".

50. PAM expects the Israeli side to stop its bullying tactics, and to abide by international law and shoulder its international responsibilities as an occupying power.

51. PAM would expect Israel to stop its heavy handed, excessive, and disproportionate retaliatory measures, against Palestinian protesters that express their God given right to claim their freedom from occupation, and their frustration at being treated as second class citizens in their own land.

52. PAM expects the European Union, the United States, and the Quartet to give a helping hand at this delicate stage, and ensure that these latest developments are built upon. No one should be allowed to sweep them into the rubbish bin of history.

53. Inspired by recent events in the Arab world, and at the effectiveness of what has become known as "people power", PAM also expects both Israeli and Palestinian peoples to voice their opinions in a peaceful manner, but with enough forcefulness and determination, for their leaders to realize that both the Israeli and the Palestinian peoples yearn for peace, and that peace is achieved only through negotiations, and not through any other oppressive or military measures.

54. PAM calls especially on the Israeli side to seize the chance to broker peace, and on the Palestinian side to maintain unity and cohesion.

55. PAM notes with satisfaction the UN Report published in mid-April entitled "Palestinian State Building: A Decisive Period" by the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process dated 13 April 2011, which gives ample proof of the Palestinian people's capacity to build a viable state of their own.

56. PAM looks favorably at the new “spring” that awaits the people of Gaza, following the Fatah-Hamas agreement, and calls on Israel, and the new Egyptian authorities to open all borders between them and Gaza, and as is often said ‘give peace a chance’.

57. In addition, while hoping that all these recent developments will lead to a viable constructive dialogue between the Israeli and the Palestinian sides, PAM hopes that developments on the ground will be such that the Palestinian side will not be compelled to have recourse to the United Nations General Assembly in September asking for recognition of its statehood.

58. PAM considers any eventual agreement on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, subscribed to by both sides, as of crucial and pivotal importance to the attainment of peace and security in the region.

59. As a regional organization committed to peace and security in the Mediterranean, PAM remains always ready to contribute towards the attainment of peace between the Israeli and the Palestinian sides, and in the present evolving scenario, where diplomatic contact, possibly away from the prying eyes of world media, play an important role in bridge building to reach consensus, PAM offers its facilities, services, and venue, to facilitate dialogue and rapprochement between the two sides, be it on a one to one basis between diplomats, or at higher levels ranging from the inter-parliamentary, to the possible meetings between experts, Ministers, or even Heads of State.

## **Addendum to the report on the Middle East 2011**

Chairman: Hon. George Vella (Malta)

Since the meeting of the Committees in Dubrovnik, developments in the Middle East continued unabated. The aim of this short report, which is to be considered as a continuation of the one presented in Dubrovnik, is to bring delegates up to date with happenings in this part of the world. As now has become customary our main focus has always been the Israeli Palestinian issue. Certain developments in Syria and Turkey are in my opinion also very relevant to the whole region. They will not be treated in depth in this report, but will be the subject of another report in due time.

### **I. Israeli-Palestinian Issue**

1. During the last three months the overriding issue was the Palestinian determination to ask for recognition of the State of Palestine by the United Nation, a request which President Mahmoud Abbas formally conveyed to UN Secretary General Ban ki-Moon during the 66<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly last month.
2. Since this intention was made public months ago, there were numerous attempts to try and convince the Palestinians not to arrive to this stage, and many were the attempts and the exhortations to bring back the Israelis and the Palestinians around the negotiating table, as this was considered to be the best way forwards towards the attainment of a durable peace.
3. France, proposing to hold an international conference in Paris before the end of July to relaunch the Middle East Peace process, was of the opinion that the status quo was not tolerable, and that we either resign ourselves to the inevitability of failure, or we set to work on this initiative . This conference never materialized.
4. What stood out during these months was the inability of the EU member states, 27 of them, to arrive at a common position on whether to grant statehood to the Palestinians.  
All the European Union officials, including the President of the European Parliament, and repeatedly Catherine Ashton, did, was to urge partners in the Middle East conflict “not to take any unilateral actions that are not conducive to a comprehensive solution, as these would damage the attainment of peace. This was the message conveyed by the EU leaders at their Summit meeting in late June.
5. Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al Maliki expressed hopes that the EU would take a decision to collectively recognize the state of Palestine within the 1967 borders. He

noted however that recognition remained within the scope of individual member states, as happened in the case of Kosovo.

6. Of similar opinion were European public figures including Romano Prodi, Hubert Vedrine, Michel Rocard, Herve de Charette, Louis Michel, Giuliano Amato, Felipe Gonzales, Peter Sutherland, Michael Lothian, and Joprge Sampaio who collectively declared that if the request for statehood were made the EU should support it. They held that Europe could not oppose the legitimate request on the part of the Palestinians.
7. In the meantime Israel warned that any UN recognition of an independent Palestinian state would nullify the 1995 Oslo Peace accord, and all other agreements.
8. While the EU remained divided over the issue of recognition, Quartet envoys failed to bridge differences, and to convince the Israelis and the Palestinians to return to the negotiating table.
9. Things were made worse when Israeli PM Netanyahu insisted that Palestinians must recognize Israel as a Jewish State, and that Israel wants sovereignty over East Jerusalem, and will refuse to accept back any Palestinian refugees.
10. A meeting of the Quartet in mid July in Washington was described as “a missed opportunity”, as it did not even manage to come out with a clear balanced statement.
11. Undeterred by the positions taken by the EU, the USA, and by the Quartet, President Mahmoud Abbas formally launched the international campaign for UN recognition of the State of Palestine, stating “we are ready to co-exist with our neighbor once our rights have been recognized”.
12. As usual, the EU, which has always been quick to condemn, but very, very, slow to take any decisive action if any, in late August, together with the Quartet, condemned the Israeli government ‘s decision to grant more than 200 building permits for housing units in the West Bank settlement of Ariel. Ironically many many more permits were to be granted later on!
13. EU member state remained divided on the issue of Palestinian statehood, and a middle of the road option was floated, to give to the Palestinian people an ‘observer state status like that of the Vatican’. This status would give them various possibilities for being better integrated into UN organizations such as WHO, UNESCO, and UNICEF.  
Catherine Ashton contended that there should be no preconditions but that a framework should be set in place allowing talks to be resumed.
14. A few days before President Abbas speech at the UN, Turkey took a vanguard position in declaring its full support of recognition of the Palestinian state by the UN

- Security Council.. Russia, China, South Africa, Lebanon, Brazil and India, are also all expected to support the Palestinian request.
15. In the meantime, conscious of the lack of agreement between the EU Member states, President Sarkozy proposed an intermediate status for the Palestinians, as an 'observer state' at the UN, suggesting a one year timescale for reaching a definitive peace deal with Israel.
  16. The Palestinians reacted by saying that they are prepared to consider other 'alternatives' to their request, even including going to the General Assembly of the UN, but only after the UN Security Council takes a vote on its request for statehood.
  17. It has to be said that President Obama's speech at the UN on the 21<sup>st</sup>.September, disappointed many who were expecting something more tangible and more concrete, considering the commitment he had pledged to undertake in the Israeli Palestinian issue ever since he took office, and in the light of his declared policy as outlined in his Cairo speech. While declaring that "Palestinians deserve their own state", he quipped that "genuine peace can only be realized between Israelis and Palestinians themselves".
  18. In a similar vein Mr.Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council, had this piece of advice to give: 'Now is the time for politics: for dialogue and negotiations" adding that "the resumption of direct talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority is the top priority". Many member states of the EU also took this line of approach in their speeches.
  19. In his historical speech to the UN GA, President Mahmoud Abbas said that Israeli policy of more and more settlements on occupied Palestinian land will have to cease before negotiations resume, but he said the Israelis refuse to be bound by preconditions so that they can carry on with their policy. "Let us build the bridges of dialogue, instead of checkpoints" said Mahmoud Abbas. "The moment of truth has arrived", and that 'The Arab spring has come to the Palestinian people". And 'the time has come for an independent Palestine.' "Enough is enough" he said.
  20. Prime Minister Netanyahu, who in the last two and a half years only met Mahmoud Abbas once, in his speech repeatedly, said that Israel wants peace, which he said comes only through negotiations. He warned against militant Islam, and remarked that the Arab spring could turn into a nuclear winter. He gave his reasons why the West Bank could never be armed, and that his vision is of a demilitarized Palestinian state recognizing the Jewish state of Israel. He made it clear he does not want Palestinians to 'flood' Israel. He also explained that according to him the settlements are not the core conflict with the Palestinians, but rather the result of the conflict.
  21. While the UN Security Council began considering Palestine's application for recognition of its statehood, the Quartet made an urgent appeal for the parties to resume direct negotiations with no preconditions so as to reach an agreement before

- the end of 2012. The plan proposed foresees a preparatory meeting within a month to agree on an agenda and the method of proceeding and negotiating. Within three months the parties are to come forwards with comprehensive proposals on territory and security, and then achieve substantial progress within 6 months. The Quartet also proposed a donor's conference while at the same time recognizing the achievements of the Palestinian Authority in preparing institutions for statehood. In addition the Quartet appealed both parties to refrain from provocative actions if negotiations were to be effective.
22. In less than two days following this declaration by the Quartet, a decision was taken in Israel to continue with settlement expansion in East Jerusalem with the construction of about 1000 new housing units in Gilo. The EU deplored this decision and described it as a 'provocative' action.
  23. Meanwhile the S&D, ALDE, GUE, Greens/EFA groupings in the European Parliament gave their support to the request made by President Abbas for Palestine's bid for statehood to be accepted by the UN. MEP Cohn Benedict did not mince words when he said that a historic opportunity had been missed and that the Obamas, the Sarkozys, and the Merkels of this world should know that for domestic policy reasons they are endangering peace throughout the region.
  24. Concurrently a resolution adopted by the European Parliament considers Palestine's bid for statehood at the UN as 'legitimate', and called on the state of Israel to put an end to settlement or colonization in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem.
  25. Following President Abbas address at the Council of Europe where he urged Europeans to support the "Palestinian Spring", the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly passed a resolution granting the status of 'Partner for Democracy' to the Palestinian National Council; a status that will give the PNC the right to be represented with six members with right to address the Assembly.
  26. Throughout all this, Hamas, made it amply clear that they were not supporting President Abbas in his quest for recognition of statehood at the UN.
  27. The latest development was the surprise agreement reached between Israel and Hamas, mediated by Egypt, to release 1025 Palestinian prisoners in three batches, over a period of time, in exchange for the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, who was caught and detained by the Hamas five years ago. Prima facie this is very welcome news indeed. However the timing and the details of the agreement elicit certain doubts as to whether this move by the Israeli side was not meant to boost Hamas, and detract from the standing and the authority of President Abbas as the Palestinian, leader which was boosted by his determination to present the case for Palestine's statehood to the UN Security Council.  
Or was it meant as a sop to Hamas, to soften their stand, considering that Israel at the moment is concerned with the new found strength of the Hizbollah in Lebanon, the

turmoil in neighbouring Syria, the break in relations with Turkey, and the prospects of less warm relations with the new administration in Egypt?