



## **First Standing Committee on Political and Security Cooperation**

*Ad Hoc* Committee on the Middle East

**Chairman: Hon. George Vella (Malta)**

### **Middle East Peace Process & Events in the Arab World**

Annex I:

#### **RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ISRAELI PALESTINIAN ISSUE** (An Update on Events since Last Meeting in Ankara)

Events in the Arab Spring countries, and particularly in Syria, have overshadowed developments, or the lack of them, on the Israeli Palestinian front. European Union Commission President Barroso warned that the Middle East Peace Process could not become an orphan of the Arab Spring.

The situation on the ground is best described by what Catherine Ashton and Ban Ki-Moon had to say on the situation. Baroness Ashton said that “Israel must immediately end all activities in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem, since these activities are illegal and threaten to make a two state solution impossible”. Ban Ki-Moon went a step further by saying that “The absence of direct peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, in addition to the dramatic events in the Middle East, have moved the parties away from the search for a Two State Solution”. The two sides, according to Ban Ki-Moon, have moved into what he called a ‘one-state reality’.

Sadly, the mid-June meeting of the Middle East Quartet took no concrete decisions and stopped as usual at simple condemnations.

The EU does not go beyond declarations harshly condemning Israeli settlement policies, while Israel continues building on occupied land, further buoyed by the recent report of a panel of Israeli jurists that concluded that the West Bank was not occupied territory and that therefore Israel had the legal right to settle it.

The US reiterated that it opposed any Israeli plan to transform unauthorized outposts into “legal settlements”.

Meanwhile tensions exist in ethnically mixed, but politically divided Jerusalem. The soaring cost of living, and unpaid salaries, triggered protests in the West Bank with calls for the resignation of the Palestinian Prime Minister, who immediately took measures to cut down fuel prices and VAT.

These protests alarmed Israel as these popular demands could undermine the stability of Fatah's control over the West Bank. Israel is also concerned about the growing lawlessness on the country's southern border, and the deterioration in Egypt's control of Sinai's security following the crossing into Israel of militants from Egypt's Sinai Desert.

Rockets fired from Gaza hit Israel, and retaliation by bombing Israeli Gaza was immediate. Ehud Barak went as far as suggesting that Israel should consider imposing unilaterally the borders of a future Palestinian State.

Thousands of Palestinians, including minors, still languish in Israeli prisons, subjected to human rights violations, detention without trial, restrictive visiting rights, and limited access to education material, on the pretext of "administrative detention". Egypt managed to broker an easing of this policy with Israel, but quick ways of going round the agreement were soon found.

In the meantime, in a move to stave off early elections, Benjamin Netanyahu struck a coalition deal with the Kadima Party, saying that the new coalition government will promote a "responsible" peace process with the Palestinians. The only positive outcome was that Mahmoud Abbas was to meet the Israeli Vice Premier Shaul Mofaz, in the highest level meeting between the two sides since peace talks broke down in 2010. However, differences have already appeared in this new coalition over the issue of military conscription of the Ultra orthodox Jews.

Relations between Palestinian factions also leave much to be desired. Plans by Fatah and Hamas to revive their stalled reconciliation agreement with the aim of establishing a unity government by last June and hold elections within six months, have vanished in thin air.

Ismail Haniyeh's meeting with the chairman of the Palestinian Central Election Committee to plan the overseeing of elections, and the meeting of an election committee of the Palestinian National Council in Amman to prepare for elections in the PLO's legislative body, proved fruitless when Hamas stopped voter registration in the Gaza Strip because of what they called "continued arrests of its members in the West bank by the security forces of the Palestinian Authority". What is of concern is that certain moves by Hamas in Gaza raise suspicion that Hamas may be thinking of announcing an independent state in the Gaza strip.

On the international stage, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has had meetings with Russian President Putin, German Chancellor Merkel, and French President Hollande, calling for an international peace conference on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, asking the United Nations to grant Palestine a 'state status' at the Rio +20 international conference, and seeking to upgrade his country's status at the UNGA this month, supported by the Arab League countries, and Islam states, besides the support of the 120 member Non-Aligned Movement. The US is pulling all the stops to dissuade President Abbas from seeking "non member status" at the ongoing UNGA.

On the home front, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Liebermann, in a bid to delegitimize President Abbas, has called on the Middle East Quartet to force elections on the Palestinians in a bid to oust President Mahmoud Abbas.

It is worth noting that both the Israeli Prime Minister and the Defence Minister criticized this move of Liebermann and disassociated themselves from this initiative.

Rumours have it that President Abbas may resign from his post after the UNGA which starts on the 27<sup>th</sup> September.

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