

UN VOTE ON PALESTINE: MAMHMOUD ABBAS’ VICTORY OR SPRINGBOARD FOR HAMAS?

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By 138 votes in favour, 9 against and 41 abstentions, the United Nations General Assembly has granted Observer status to Palestine on the evening of Thursday 29th November. After the failure of a similar initiative last year, the vote appears as a personal success for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who has demonstrated an unwavering determination in this matter. The UN decision was greeted with joy in the major Palestinian cities, especially in Ramallah, where Fatah supporters held up portraits of President Abbas and Yasser Arafat at the headquarters of the Palestinian Authority (PA). A “unitary” parade also took place in Gaza after Hamas allowed people to express their feelings. The Islamist party has indeed called the event “a victory on the road to the liberation of Palestine.” Remember that it was opposed to this approach until a statement of support of its leader Khaled Meshaal and the entire politburo in exile on Monday.

One can only record the strong symbolic dimension of the accession of a state of Palestine to the UN, even as a non-member observer. In the short term, this change of international status should not however have any concrete impact on the situation on the ground and on the process of negotiations with Israel. Just days after the end of the operation “Pillar of Defense”, it is clear that the future of relations between Palestinians and Israelis depends more on the ability, or willingness, of the leaders in Gaza to impose with respect the truce with jihadist groups after that the UN vote. In addition, the position of Khaled Meshaal demonstrates the desire of Hamas to ride on the success of the Palestinian president. Finally, note that this bringing together between the front of Fatah and Hamas should not facilitate the resumption of talks with Israel within two months of elections focused on security issues.

Symbolic victory of Mahmoud Abbas

Before analysing in detail the practical implications of Thursday's vote, it should be noted the success of the international strategy maintained by Mahmoud Abbas. Initially, the determination of the Palestinian President to take the UN path responded mainly to domestic political imperatives. Faced with the risk of Hamas seizing power throughout Palestinian territories, he needed a victory on the diplomatic front to restore, at least in part, the lost credibility of Fatah. In view of the scenes of jubilation and excitement found in the streets of the West Bank and Gaza, Mahmoud Abbas seems to have achieved his goal of getting to the heart of

Palestinians as the one who has managed to offer them a state. Aware of the need to appear as a man of dialogue on the international scene, the Palestinian president has promised to do everything to "revive negotiations with Israel," saying that a vote in favour of the resolution was the "last chance to save the two-state solution".

The success of Mahmoud Abbas should not obscure the fact that PA has only narrow margins available to maintain economic and social stability. If he wants to reap the benefits of this diplomatic result, the Palestinian president will now have to demonstrate his ability to get the freezing of the West Bank settlement. It must also cope with non-negligible risk of a claim for debts accumulated toward Israel, including the power consumption of the West Bank. The catastrophic financial situation of the AP, and the budgetary cuts to which its principal government departments are already subjected to, are a good indication of the practical difficulties that stand in the way of even Palestine to effective independence.

Strength of the United States and Israel against unilateral independence

The United States and Israel have always expressed their opposition to the accession of Palestine to the UN outside the framework of peace negotiations. At the end of the vote of the General Assembly, the U.S. Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice justified this opposition by condemning the decision as an "unfortunate and counterproductive resolution (that) places further obstacles in the path to peace." Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for his part lamented about the "defamatory" remarks made by Mahmoud Abbas at the UN in New York. He also reiterated that tangible assurances for the security of Israel remained the only means available to the Palestinians for a separate state. The Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, ally of the Likud of Benjamin Netanyahu for the legislative elections of January 22, likened the attitude of Mahmoud Abbas to "political terrorism", saying that he was trying to "compensate outside for its failures in domestic policy." In addition to these statements, Israel announced the construction of 3,000 new housing units in the "E1" in the West Bank, between Ma'ale Adumim and Jerusalem. Israeli Minister of Finance Yuval Steinitz has also suspended the transfer of 90 million euros of VAT and customs duties to the AP.

The wide approval of the resolution on Palestine - only Canada, the Czech Republic, Panama and four micro-Pacific states have aligned themselves with the position of the United States and Israel - despite these arguments thus demonstrates the growing international isolation suffered by Washington and Tel Aviv on this issue. It is interesting to note the split vote of the European Union, of which 14 of 27 members voted in favor of UN membership. France has voted for and calling for an early resumption of "direct dialogue", while the UK and Germany abstained. The divergence of Europeans, who remain the largest donors to the PA, reflect their concerns about the political consequences of the recognition of a Palestinian state in the context of chaos that followed the Arab revolutions of 2011.

Risk of emergence of Hamas at the top of the AP

Clearly seen, the granting of observer status by the UN to Palestine is not enough to create a state. Instead, it could delay a little the resumption of peace negotiations. In the coming months, the developments in the field will largely depend on the use that Palestine will make Palestine of its prerogatives related to its new status. The

temptation to bring the issue of settlement before the International Criminal Court, the option is still subject to approval by signatory States of the Rome Statute of 1998, would move away indeed a little more the prospect for a solution negotiated with the state Hebrew. The greatest risk, however, lies in the collapse of the Palestinian Authority in the hands of Hamas. Militarily has been weakened by the operation "Pillar of Defence" and the terrorist group has instead reinforced its legitimacy in the minds of the Palestinian population. It now seems to have decided to keep the speech of Palestinian unity, calling to continue the "path of resistance and Jihad".

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