



Israel, Palestine and the Middle East

by Simon Belt

The United Nations General Assembly upgraded Palestine's status to be a ***non-member observer state*** from its previous ***non-member observer entity*** status, a cause for joy this week by my friends who have supported the rights of Palestinians to have their own state for as long as I've known. After all, Palestine has been a territory that has been ruled over by just about everybody except themselves.

Is it really a great victory for the beleaguered Palestinian people, a moment progressive minded people have long been campaigning for, a cause for Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas to celebrate?

In front of a printed backdrop of the West Bank, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas told thousands of flag-waving supporters in Ramallah, that the vote at the UN had shown that the international community stood behind the Palestinian people. In a telling phrase Mr Abbas said "We stood fast and we prevailed, because we are the voice of these people", a reference to the split between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza.

In response Israel halted the transfer of tax revenues to the Palestinian Authority (PA), which rules the West Bank, and is heavily dependant on tax revenues Israel collects on its behalf. The decision, announced on Sunday by the Israeli finance ministry, means 460m shekels (\$120m; £75m) will be withheld in December, to be used to offset the PA's debts, which include millions owed to Israel's electricity company.

Israel also announced it would move ahead with building thousands of new homes in Israeli settlements in the West Bank, in another apparent response to the UN vote. Rejected the UN's decision, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the campaign for Palestinian statehood spearheaded by President Abbas "a gross violation of the agreements signed with the state of Israel", a reference to peace accords signed in the 1990s.

There is clearly a changing international backdrop to the relationship between the existence of Israel on Palestiiian land and the realisation of an independent Palestinian state. The acceptance of a two state solution by all concerned, and the current instability in the region following the recent Gulf wars, subsequent Arab Spring, and greater external interventions than

in recent decades all help to change the dynamics and perceptions of what's going on. Perhaps the biggest change that's important to be mindful of though is the collapse of purposeful politics internationally leading to a new framework of understanding.

NATO's 'model intervention' in Libya and the removal of Gaddafi has left a profoundly unstable aftermath that few western leaders want to repeat and certainly not take a national lead in replicating in other areas of the Middle East. The chaos caused by relatively low-key meddling in Syria so far is a clear warning that grandstanding as statesmen with purpose is more than likely to backfire, and that dismantling the apparatus of control used to keep a lid on the region will cause a never ending series of changes in regimes.



Not unconnected with Syria is the ongoing and inherent tension caused by the displacement of Palestinians through the creation and maintenance of the State of Israel, as the USA through the UN replaced Great Britain and the League of Nations as global policeman at the end of the second world war. Formally liberal and supporting the overthrow of imperial rule across the Middle East, the United States has heavily funded and supported the State of Israel since, largely justified as a bulwark against Soviet expansion in the Cold War era. Obviously the Cold War is over, with the West 'winning' though the celebrations soon exposed the lack of actual dynamic of the victors.

The historical baggage of what Israel represents, the colonialism and nationalism of the past, is seen in stark contrast to the enlightened self-view many liberals have of themselves today as cosmopolitans in a highly globalised world where diplomacy at the UN is the way mature democracies sort out problems. The fact that those same liberals who very publicly weep at Palestinian children maimed and killed by Israeli drone attacks, seem to miss every opportunity to highlight the very same type of attacks when conducted by Obama in Pakistan should be cause for concern and thinking through the differences.

However well dressed up, the UN's politically correct anti-racism that points the finger at the naughty Israelis, and their fan club of 'progressives' express a thoroughly objectionable elitist contempt for the people of another country, and one the subordinates ourselves to western elites to teach them a lesson through crippling sanctions and military intervention. The re-invention of intervention in the Middle East by the UN (US, UK and France with blue helmets on thousands of miles away) as an act of anti-colonialism is rather reminiscent of how the US presented its interventions to replace Great Britain after the 2nd WW and is no more progressive for it.

Solidarity with the Palestinian cause used to embody a belief in Palestinians determining their own future. Yet the administrative changing of the status in the UN in New York from its previous **non-member observer entity** status to a **non-member observer state** seems likely to set back the chances of self determination by the Palestinians rather than provide any useful support for it. The justification for supporting the external management of the rights of Palestinians on their behalf, is currently being done through bleeding heart images of dead and dying children. Parading images of dying and dead children, in the absense of the politics of self-determination, plays for both sides who each call for more external intervention to bring the other side to the negotiating table. External intervention in the Middle East is surely the very problem rather than the solution.