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## Portugal and the Palestinian bid to join UNESCO and the United Nations

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On 31 October 2011, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) admitted Palestine as a full member state by a vote of 107 to 14, with 52 abstentions. Emboldened by the result, the Palestinian Authority announced immediately that it plans to seek membership in other United Nations (UN) agencies. "We have gotten a precedent that might open the road for us to join other agencies", said Ambassador Ibrahim Khraishi, the Palestinian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva (UNOG).<sup>1</sup> "The achievement of joining UNESCO opens the door for Palestine to become a member in all of the United Nations agencies", he added.<sup>2</sup> However, Riyad al-Maliki, the Palestinian Foreign Affairs Minister, corrected Kraishi's initial reaction and made it clear that, at this stage, the Palestinian Authority would not seek to join more UN agencies as a full member. "At this moment, we are not concerned with applying for membership for Palestine in the rest of the international organizations", he said.<sup>3</sup>

As one of the current Security Council non-permanent members,<sup>4</sup> Portugal's vote in Paris was awaited with interest. Even though the two processes are independent of each other, the fact is that the outcome of the Palestinian bid to join UNESCO was monitored with a view toward Mahmoud Abbas' formal request for full UN membership, submitted to the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, on 23 September 2011.<sup>5</sup> Gaining the Portuguese vote in the Security Council has been one of the targets of Palestinian diplomacy. On 20 October, al-Maliki met with his Portuguese counterpart Paulo Portas and with Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho in a bid to gather support for the upcoming vote on the UN Security Council.<sup>6</sup> Equally important, al-Maliki did not ignore that in just a few days, on 1 November, Portugal would take over the Security Council presidency. In other words, during the month of November, a critical period for the Palestinian Authority, Portugal is responsible for managing the Security

1 Josef Federman, "UNESCO Euphoria: Palestinians step up UN efforts" (*Associated Press*, 1 November 2011).

2 "Palestinians plan to get membership in 16 UN bodies: official" (*Xinhua*, 2 November 2011).

3 Tom Perry, "Palestinians won't accept less than full U.N. seat: minister" (*Reuters*, 3 November 2011).

4 For a provisional analysis of the Portuguese ongoing presence as non-permanent member in the Security Council, see Pedro Seabra, "First impressions: Portugal and the UNSC eight months on" (*IPRIS Lusophone Countries Bulletin*, No. 23, September 2011), pp. 3-8.

5 Regarding the formal steps that will take place in the process, see Sérgio Peçanha and Lisa Waananen, "Steps in the Palestinian Bid for U.N. Membership" (*The New York Times*, 23 September 2011).

6 "MNE recebe quinta-feira homólogo da Autoridade Palestiniana" (*Lusa*, 19 October 2011).



Council's agenda, presiding at all the meetings and acting as spokesperson.

Portugal has not yet revealed how it will vote in the Security Council regarding the Palestinian request for UN membership. At this stage, according to al-Maliki, eight members of the Security Council – Brazil, China, Gabon, India, Lebanon, Nigeria, Russia, and South Africa – have pledged to support the Palestinian statehood application. However, Security Council decisions require the support of nine of the fifteen members, and no vetoes from the five permanent members, in order to pass.<sup>7</sup> In the last few weeks, the Palestinian Authority has therefore devoted full attention to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Colombia and Portugal, hoping “to win enough support to trigger the veto, which would have embarrassed the US by forcing it to go against the will of the international community”.<sup>8</sup>

It was against this background that the votes for Palestinian membership at UNESCO were cast in Paris. Among the 52 abstentions were Bosnia-Herzegovina, Colombia and Portugal, a clear “blow for Abbas”, who has spent much of his time courting these specific countries.<sup>9</sup> Portuguese Foreign Minister Paulo Portas explained the abstention as a “European vote”, adding that the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, urged European Union (EU) member states to abstain.<sup>10</sup> Yet, since 28 October, Portas knew that a consensus among EU countries on an abstention was impossible to obtain. In other words, after Ashton's failure to reach a consensus, each EU country could vote as it wanted.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, five EU member states voted against the Palestinian bid to join UNESCO (Czech Republic, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Sweden), eleven in favor (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Slovenia, and Spain), and eleven abstained (Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and the United Kingdom).<sup>12</sup>

Riyad H. Mansour, the Permanent Observer of the Palestinian Authority to the United Nations, reacted by saying that he “was surprised by the vote of Portugal”, since “it is a country that fits the environment in which Spain, France, Ireland, Luxembourg and others that voted

in favor”.<sup>13</sup> Mansour is correct; the Portuguese abstention isolated it from other Mediterranean EU member states like Cyprus, France, Greece, Malta, and Spain, whose position on this matter is traditionally similar.

Foreign Minister Portas added, one day later, that Portugal could not “vote in favor because there is still no concrete sign of peace negotiations”.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, as if trying to square the circle, he emphasized that Portugal would never vote against the Palestinian bid. Probably, there is an additional factor that can help explain the Portuguese vote: simply put, Portas did not wish to vote ‘against’ the United States. Thus, the abstention was a compromise political solution.

However, there are a few problems with this move. First, as mentioned above, Portugal voted in isolation from France and Spain, the two EU member states with interests and views regarding the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) closest to Portugal. By doing so, the Portuguese government lost diplomatic ground and, to a certain extent, failed to protect its influence among the MENA countries. Second, the Palestinian bid to join UNESCO as full member was the perfect opportunity to settle political debts. Indeed, in October 2010, Portugal was elected to the Security Council in part thanks to the support of the 57 member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Although it is unlikely that João Gomes Cravinho, at the time the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, promised to back the Arab Peace Initiative, as it was then reported by the Canadian press, it is nonetheless likely that some campaign commitments were made regarding the Palestinian issue.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the Palestinian Authority bid to join UNESCO could be seen as an almost cost-free opportunity to safeguard the Portuguese reputation and credibility, while at the same time paying back the OIC support.<sup>16</sup> Having failed to do so, sooner or later, the Portuguese abstention will be remembered by the MENA states in order to justify their vote elsewhere against Portuguese interests.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, a vote in favor of the Palestinian bid to join UNESCO – as France did – would enlarge the number of options available to the Portuguese representation in the Security Council. Immediately after voting in favor of the Palestinian bid to join UNESCO, France felt free to use the

7 See Jack Khoury, “Palestinian FM: Eight UN Security Council members support statehood bid” (*Haaretz*, 29 September 2011).

8 “Palestinian hopes of rallying 9 vote majority at Security Council suffer with Bosnia stalemate” (*Associated Press*, 31 October 2011).

9 Flavia Krause-Jackson and Fadwa Hodali, “Palestinians Determined to Fight Repeated U.S. Rejection at UN” (*Bloomberg*, 3 November 2011).

10 “Paulo Portas diz que abstenção de Portugal sobre a admissão da Palestina à UNESCO foi um “voto europeu” (*Lusa*, 31 October 2011).

11 Georges Malbrunot, “Pourquoi la France crée la surprise et dit oui à la Palestine à l'Unesco?” (*Figaro Blog – De Bagdad à Jérusalem: L'Orient indiscret*, 31 October 2011).

12 See “How Unesco countries voted on Palestinian membership” (*The Guardian*, 1 November 2011).

13 “Abstenção de Portugal na UNESCO surpreendeu palestinianos” (*Lusa*, 1 November 2011).

14 “Paulo Portas explica abstenção portuguesa como “voto europeu”” (*Lusa*, 1 November 2011).

15 Steven Edwards, “Canada loses UN Security Council seat despite guarantees” (*National Post*, 12 October 2011).

16 João Gomes Cravinho, later on, emphasized that Portugal would have to honor its campaign commitments, namely regarding the OIC. See João Gomes Cravinho, “A campanha portuguesa para o Conselho de Segurança” (*Relações Internacionais*, No. 28, December 2010), pp. 22-23.

17 For example, Portugal is seeking at this stage a seat on the Human Rights Council for 2014-2017.



window of opportunity to announce that it would abstain in the Security Council.<sup>18</sup> Even though Portugal is also likely to abstain, unlike France it will do so under pressure and with limited strategic options. In other words, the abstention in Paris will unnecessarily raise the political costs of the abstention in New York.

Like French President Nicolas Sarkozy, the Portuguese Foreign Minister should make it clear, as soon as possible, that if the Palestinian Authority persists with its intent of gaining full UN membership, then Portugal will abstain, while at the same time clarifying that Lisbon, at this stage, favors the upgrade from observer entity to non-member observer state.<sup>19</sup> In fact, to a certain extent, Portugal already expressed this intent. In his speech at the 66<sup>th</sup> Session of UN General Assembly in New York, last September, Prime Minister Passos Coelho said that Portugal was “available to support an enhanced status of Palestine in the United Nations”.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in return, if the Palestinian Authority is willing to change its current diplomatic course, then Portugal would support future Palestinian efforts to join other UN agencies. This recalibration of the Portuguese diplomatic strategy has a few advantages. First, it allows the realignment, once again, of the Portuguese diplomatic strategy with the French (and Spanish). Second, Portugal would assume a political commitment that is satisfactory to the average country of the Middle East and North Africa. Third, the Portuguese government would increase the range of options available. This scenario would also allow

Foreign Minister Paulo Portas to avoid any substantive diplomatic collision course with the United States. Although, at this stage, al-Maliki says that the Palestinian Authority “will not accept less than (...) full member state” status, that should not be understood as a final position. Indeed, al-Maliki’s “remarks may not reflect the path President Mahmoud Abbas may take if the membership bid fails”.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of the strategy that will be adopted later on by Abbas, the EU member states, Portugal included, should review their approach to the frozen Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The ongoing Arab Spring has only made the strategic review more urgent. Therefore, a new mix of carrots and sticks is needed. Supporting the Palestinian bid to join other UN agencies, while simultaneously refusing to support their application for full UN membership, would be a balanced approach. On one hand, it rejects the current impasse that favors only Israel. On the other, it makes clear to the Palestinian Authority that Portuguese support does not correspond to a blank cheque.

“All for Palestine, nothing against Israel”, has been Paulo Portas’ *motto*, since he was appointed Foreign Minister in June 2011. This abstract formula allows many interpretations. Still, one key element is the search for a balanced approach. In general, the Portuguese diplomatic strategy is perceived by the MENA countries as balanced regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The abstention *vis-à-vis* the Palestinian bid to join UNESCO failed to maintain the balance. As a consequence, as soon as possible, Portugal needs to correct the current trajectory and return to an evenhanded diplomatic position. The Security Council could be the right stage to start doing so.

18 “France says to abstain in Palestinian Security Council vote” (*Agence France-Presse*, 4 November 2011).

19 For a brief explanation regarding the different status, see “Observer entities, observer states and full membership at the UN” (*The Telegraph*, 23 September 2011).

20 “Discurso do Primeiro-Ministro na 66ª sessão da Assembleia Geral das Nações Unidas, em Nova Iorque” (*Portal do Governo*, 24 September 2011).

21 Tom Perry, “Palestinians won’t accept less than full U.N. seat: minister” (*Reuters*, 3 November 2011).

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