

We are ready for freedom and independence

By Ghassan Khatib*

After its last meeting, the executive committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization announced officially its intention to go to the United Nations to seek the help of the international community in ending Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, achieving freedom and independence and enjoying the legitimate rights of self-determination in accordance with international law and United Nations resolutions.

The PLO qualified its announcement with the statement that the priority of the Palestinian leadership remains achieving a bilateral agreement on two states with Israel and that, only if that fails by September will the leadership pursue the UN alternative. This has also been made clear through repeated statements by the Palestinian president. He has wasted no opportunity to emphasize that the leadership's priority remains the resumption of credible peace negotiations based on the clear terms of reference established at the Madrid conference, i.e., the principle of land for peace, in addition to the Arab Peace Initiative and the roadmap. However, the Palestinian leadership is not interested in talks for the sake of talking.

The main reason for the PLO decision is its conclusion that Israel has been at times avoiding and other times exploiting bilateral negotiations in order to consolidate its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and expand illegal settlements. The current Israeli government has not bothered to disavow this. For example, recently

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an aide to Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu stated that the idea of negotiations on the borders of 1967 with a land swap of equal proportions is "a joke" to the prime minister and that Israel has no land for swapping.

Therefore, the Palestinian intention to seek discussion on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by the international community at the UN is by no means a unilateral move, as Israel claims. Rather, it is a legitimate step to involve the international community after nearly 20 years of bilateral negotiations that have not brought us to meet the objective of peace based on a two-state solution. In addition, there is no contradiction between continuing efforts to resume meaningful peace negotiations, and international efforts that could help develop a frame of reference for future bilateral negotiations.

It was, therefore, very difficult for Palestinians to understand the United States Senate resolution that threatened to stop American financial aid to the Palestinian Authority if the PLO proceeds to the United Nations on this basis. Governments, organizations or individuals can be punished if they violate international law. It is ironic, however, to learn of threats to a people and its leadership for going to the UN to discuss peaceful and legal means of ending a military occupation that the world body considers belligerent and illegal.

Palestinians are not going to the UN prematurely. First, they fulfilled their obligations of building efficient and mature government institutions capable of being the institutions of an independent state, as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and UN agencies have attested. Second, Palestinians are going to the UN after two decades of bilateral negotiations and only after the end of the year that will be marked in September that was designated for the most recent round of bilateral talks called for by this US administration. In other words, the Palestinians are going to the UN to say to the

international community: "We are ready for freedom and independence. Are you ready to help us achieve that?"

The international community has three options. Either it can help avoid that discussion by convincing Israel to stop expanding settlements and resume negotiations on two states on the basis of the 1967 borders. Or it can take up its responsibilities in the UN and vote for a resolution adopting the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the borders of 1967 that lives in peace with all its neighbors, including Israel. The alternative, of course, is to let the Palestinian leadership down, which will mean leaving it to the mercy of both the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian opposition – path that will certainly push this conflict into a completely new phase.
