


Nov 04, 2016 by *Abeer Al-Najjar*

## **Public Diplomacy and the Legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority** <sup>[1]</sup>

Yesterday, the Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) made a public statement accepting the call of the French president Nicolas Sarkozy for a Middle East peace conference and his offer to host this conference. In his statement, Abbas emphasized that a condition for holding the conference must be a total freeze of settlement expansion in the Palestinian territories. This reflects clarity in the political rhetoric and an attempt to set the negotiations and the conflict agenda that is rare in the history of the Palestinian public diplomacy. The Palestinian Authority (PA) is considered by many writers and commentators to be the worst campaigner for the best cause, and is frequently criticized for this in the Arab press.

Last week, the Palestinian Authority announced their willingness to pursue a Palestinian state even through a unilateral move. To date, they have not been successful in their public diplomacy, often poorly reacting to the Israeli allegations in international news. The PA lost much of what was left of international and local popularity as a result of their ineffective communication regarding their position on Goldstone's report on the 2009 Israeli War in Gaza and due to their poor performance during the war itself, earlier this year.

Last Thursday, the Palestinian Authority received from the Arab League renewed support for the recognition of the pre-1967 borders as the borders of the future Palestinian state. Latin America and Europe are Abu Mazen's next focus. The PA will have to work hard to get the European Union on board and harder still to prevent the U.S. from using their veto against it if it is taken to the UN Security Council. This initiative, if well handled by the Palestinian leadership can place all their international efforts into a new context. Based on the early news and emphasis placed on the international re-recognition of pre-1967 borders, the situation looks promising if not reminiscent of Israel's tactics at many occasions but particularly those used during Camp David II July 2000. This move can be interpreted as Abbas' recognition of the legitimacy problem faced by the PA since Hamas took control over Gaza in 2006 and appeared as the "defender of the Palestinians" during the 2009 war.

The Palestinian Authority can use the argument that Israel has been changing unilaterally the facts on the ground in a way that will soon make the declaration of the Palestinian state even as a negotiation product impossible. Hopefully, the PA will successfully continue their efforts to convince more countries to recognize and if not recognize to internally discuss their position on the recognition of the borders previously endorsed by the UN Resolution 242 . Such a move could strengthen the PA internally after its poor performance with regard to Hamas and given the resultant frustration of the Palestinian people, many of whom perceive their actions as a conspiracy against those in Gaza. Moreover, it would effectively contribute to setting the agenda of the main issues in any future American led or Quartet led negotiations with Israel.