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Mideast Peace Mired as Abbas Trades Taunts With Netanyahu

Media Mention of Hussein Ibish in Bloomberg - September 27, 2012 - 11:00pm

<http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-09-27/mideast-peace-mired-as-abbas-trades-...> [1]

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu exchanged taunts at the United Nations as the world body watched a peace process that has all but slipped away.

A year after bidding unsuccessfully at the UN for Palestinian statehood, Abbas took to the podium of the General Assembly yesterday to accuse Israel of a “campaign of ethnic cleansing” against the Palestinian people in the West Bank. The Israeli leader responded less than an hour later that “libelous speeches” aren’t the way to reach a peaceful resolution to the long-standing conflict.

Their performances underlined the paralysis in the peace process and the growing indifference of international policy makers now preoccupied with the war in Syria and Iran’s nuclear program.

“Abbas and Netanyahu spoke past one another, barely touching on the same issues,” said Robert Danin, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington. “With Abbas focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Netanyahu’s concentration on Iran, both have in effect thrown the ball back into the United States’ court.”

For President Barack Obama, the immediate focus is on winning re-election in November. Three years ago, in his first UN address, he met with both leaders and vowed to “not waiver in my pursuit of peace.” This year, in his Sept. 25 address to the UN, the American leader offered no fresh ideas to break the deadlock.

His first and only attempt to bring Abbas and Netanyahu back to the negotiating table collapsed in 2010 over the issue of limiting the construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Dying Process

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and senior U.S. diplomats met with Abbas and the Palestinian delegation yesterday. In a reflection of how little progress has been made in advancing the peace process, conversation during the 30- minute meeting touched on several topics that had little direct impact on Palestinians.

Instead, Clinton and Abbas discussed Syria’s civil war, instability in Lebanon, Iran and the political transition in Egypt, according to an official present at the talks who wasn’t authorized to be identified discussing the private session.

In the absence of American leadership to guide peace talks, Abbas and Netanyahu were vague about what their next steps would be.

After his failed bid last year for UN membership on par with Israel, Abbas has downgraded his expectations and is now seeking a limited upgrade from observer “entity” to “non- member state” in the 193-member General Assembly.

UN Upgrade

"We have begun intensive consultations with various regional organizations and member states aimed at having the General Assembly adopt a resolution considering the State of Palestine as a non-member state of the United Nations during this session," Abbas said in the UN hall.

The gap between the two sides was filled by a "blistering" display of words, Danin said. Speaking first, Abbas said Israel was "promising the Palestinian people a new catastrophe, a new Nakba." That is a word Palestinians use to refer to Israel's independence in 1948, when many Palestinians fled or were forced to leave their homes in what is now the Jewish state.

"Developments over the past year have confirmed what we have persistently drawn attention to and warned of: the catastrophic danger of the racist Israeli settlement of our country," Abbas said in a speech that elicited less applause than last year.

When Netanyahu walked up to the podium, he responded, "we won't solve our conflict with libelous speeches at the UN. We won't solve our conflict with unilateral declarations of statehood."

Iran Focus

Moving quickly past the Palestinian issue, Netanyahu reserved his strongest language for Iran in an effort to convince a broader audience that military action may be required to stop that country's nuclear program from advancing.

He attacked radical Islamists for "wanting to draw humanity back to an age of unquestioning dogma, unrelenting conflict." He spoke of a clash between "modernity and barbaric medievalism."

For Abbas, attacking Israel may serve to distract attention from his troubles at home.

Deteriorating economic conditions in the West Bank have fueled social-welfare protests. In the Gaza Strip, the Palestinians say the situation is becoming untenable.

Abbas expressed "anger" at the state of affairs and said the chances for a two-state solution were disappearing. He is not alone in thinking so. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon this week also said "the door may be closing" on that option.

Divergent Objectives

"While the two leaders delivered passionate remarks within minutes of one another, they spoke to divergent future objectives," Danin said in an e-mail.

Abbas is seeking statehood and the target audience was the UN member countries, he said, while Netanyahu's focus was Iran and his audience was one country in particular: the U.S.

The peace process isn't dead "but it is in a deep freeze, at least until after the next American election, and maybe for quite a while after that," said Hussein Ibish, senior fellow with the American Task Force on Palestine, a group based in Washington that advocates a peaceful two-state solution. "Ultimately, though, the Israelis and the Palestinians have few options other than to find a modus vivendi based on two states, and the only way to get there, in the end, is to make an agreement."

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