

Joint US-Israeli campaign against Palestinian UN bid

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The vote by Unesco to admit Palestine as a member has met with an aggressive reaction from Israel and the United States.

The Paris-based United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation voted by 107 votes to 14, with 52 abstentions, Monday, in favour of Palestinian membership—surpassing the 81 majority required.

Almost immediately, the Obama administration in Washington announced it would stop its \$60 million annual donation, which makes up almost one-quarter of Unesco's funds. The US was supported by Canada, which said it too would withhold its \$10 million contribution.

Susan Rice, US ambassador to the United Nations, described Monday's vote as "deeply damaging" to Unesco, while Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, denounced it as "inexplicable."

There were unconfirmed reports that Israel would withhold its \$2 million annual contribution. But Washington's boycott has already given the green light for Israel to announce its own punitive measures.

On Tuesday, Tel Aviv announced it would fast-track the construction of 2,000 new settlements in east Jerusalem, and withhold \$100 million in tax payments it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed that the settlement construction was not punishment for Unesco's decision. "We build in Jerusalem because it is our right and our obligation," he told the Knesset. But AFP quoted a senior government official, speaking on conditions of anonymity, saying, "These measures were agreed ... as punishment after the vote at UNESCO."

PA spokesman Ghassan Khatib denounced the move. "These are occupied territories according to international law and the settlements that are built on them are illegal under international law", he said.

In addition to the settlement building, Israel's withholding of tax revenues, which makes up a large part

of the PA budget, means the latter has had to resort to local bank loans to pay thousands of salaries. Israel is reportedly considering withdrawing the special permits granted to top Palestinian officials that allow them to move between the West Bank and Israel with relative ease.

In and of themselves, the practical consequences of Unesco's decision are limited. But this is the first time that a major UN body has granted Palestine full status. *Haaretz* cited an unnamed Western official complaining that it was "a problematic move that may cause a snowball effect, which will be difficult to stop."

The PA is said to be seeking membership status in a number of other international and UN agencies. Its representative, Riyad Mansour, said it would make applications to the UN Conference on Trade and Development amongst other organisations, and hoped to sign up to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

More pressingly for Washington and Israel, the Unesco decision comes just as the UN Security Council is due to meet to consider the PA's application for Palestinian statehood.

PA President Mahmoud Abbas submitted the bid to the United Nations General Assembly on September 23. In his speech, he detailed the "63 years of suffering" undergone by the Palestinian people as a consequence of Israeli occupation. "Enough. It is time for the Palestinian people to gain their freedom and independence," he said. The report on the Palestinian bid for statehood is to be ready for discussions on November 11, with a vote expected before the end of the year.

Abbas' application was in fact testimony to the bogus character of the two-decades long "peace process", under cover of which Israeli repression has been given carte blanche by its Western allies.

This reality was underscored by the bellicose threats of

President Barack Obama to veto the PA's application and US efforts to intimidate and threaten others to fall into line. Obama not only opposed the Palestinian application, but specified that any possibility of a Palestinian state was entirely dependent on Israel's security needs.

Washington justified its stance by claiming that the Palestinian bid was a "unilateral" action that would undermine peace talks. In reality, the US concern is that such actions might undermine its authority and control in the Middle East.

In retaliation for the PA's statehood bid, Israel announced the construction of 1,100 new homes in Gilo, in east Jerusalem, while the US Congress agreed to block nearly \$200 million of humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people, intended for food, health care and development initiatives.

Publicly, Washington has distanced itself from Tel Aviv's latest announcement to accelerate settlement construction. White House spokesperson Jay Carney said, "We are deeply disappointed by the announcement about accelerated housing construction in Jerusalem and the West Bank."

The European Union's foreign policy head Catherine Ashton too said she was "deeply concerned by the latest Israeli decisions to expedite settlement activities in response to Palestinian accession to UNESCO."

"Israeli settlement activity is illegal under international law including in East Jerusalem and an obstacle to peace," she said.

Mansour implored the UN to take action against Israel for its construction programme and "illegally hijacking" tax revenues. If Israel was not called to halt immediately, it could lead to further "escalations and provocations" in an already unstable region. "The bottom line is we want the Security Council to react to this latest escalation and provocation with a view of stopping it and containing it," he said, calling for the council to issue a statement or resolution.

Describing Israel's measures as "inhumane" Abbas' spokesman, Nabil Abu Rdainah, also called on the Middle East Quartet—the US, UN, European Union and Russia—to "put an end to this recklessness" which he warned would have "negative consequences" for the whole region.

No UN statement has been forthcoming, however, and none of the Western powers are prepared to do anything about Israel's latest flagrant breach of international law.

Washington's criticisms in particular are a cynical pose. Events surrounding the UN General Assembly and Unesco have proven that Jerusalem follows the US lead.

Collective punishment against the Palestinians is the order of the day as far as both are concerned.

More critically, the US plays the central role in inflaming tensions in the Middle East. Washington aims to secure its dominance of the region in the wake of the Arab Spring, and the overthrow of its long-term allies in Egypt and Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Following the war against Libya, widespread reports indicate that the US and Britain are making military preparations for an attack on Iran, in which Israel is expected to play the key role. Israeli warplanes last week conducted a long-range exercise, while on Wednesday Israel tested a long-range ballistic missile that has the capacity to strike Tehran.

These plans require daily contact and collusion between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu coalition government. There will be a similar coordination of responses to the PA's bid for UN membership.

As for the UN, its response to US threats to veto the Palestinian application for statehood has been to try to stall the bid—via calls for the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian talks and a "comprehensive agreement" within a year. In an interview with the Associated Press, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon complained that further efforts by the PA to join other UN agencies were "not beneficial for anybody" and might see more organisations have their funding slashed.

While calling on Israel to stop its settlement construction, Ban effectively drew an equal sign between the PA's bid for recognition and Tel Aviv's continued flouting of international law. Both parties should "refrain from provocations", he said.



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