

Palestinian Authority signs up to International Criminal Court

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Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas has signed up to join the International Criminal Court (ICC) as part of signing onto 22 United Nations conventions and institutions.

The UN's Rome Statute gave the ICC the power to prosecute individuals accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes committed since July 2002, when the statute came into force. It paves the way for the Palestinian Authority to pursue Israel through the ICC for war crimes in connection with its murderous assaults on Gaza in 2008-09, 2012 and the summer of 2014.

Israel and its main backer, the United States, are prime candidates to face prosecution. Both have refused to sign the Rome Statute and predictably opposed the Palestinian move.

The US State Department condemned what it called “an escalatory step” on the part of the Palestinians, insisting that negotiations between the two sides were the only “realistic path” towards peace. Its statement said: “Today’s action is entirely counter-productive and does nothing to further the aspirations of the Palestinian people for a sovereign and independent state.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded aggressively, saying Israel would take “steps in response and defend Israel’s soldiers.” He threatened that such a move would lay the Palestinians open to prosecution.

“It is the Palestinian Authority—which is in a unity government with Hamas, an avowed terrorist organisation that, like ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria], perpetrates war crimes—that needs to be concerned about the International Criminal Court in The Hague,” he said.

The move came just 24 hours after the UN Security

Council failed to secure the necessary nine votes for a resolution calling for an end to Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory and the establishment of a Palestinian state by 2017. With only eight members voting for the resolution, the US and Australia voting against, and Britain, Lithuania, Nigeria, the Republic of Korea and Rwanda abstaining, there was no need for Washington to use its veto.

The Obama administration had sharply criticised the resolution, dispatching Secretary of State John Kerry to the Middle East in an effort to get Abbas to delay submitting it and warning that \$700 million of US aid was at stake. It tried to persuade Jordan, which has a seat on the Security Council and sponsored the resolution, to drop it, while Security Council members, particularly Nigeria and Rwanda, came under heavy pressure to oppose or abstain in the vote.

A US State Department spokesperson said that the resolution “is not constructive, sets arbitrary deadlines, and fails to account for Israel’s security needs.”

Netanyahu opposed the 1993 Oslo Accords that began the talks ostensibly designed to establish a Palestinian state alongside Israel, with the latter limited to its 1967 borders. He has sabotaged every effort to restart peace talks. Successive Israeli governments have utilised negotiations to extract ever greater concessions from the PA, while establishing new “facts on the ground” in the form of new Zionist settlements on Palestinian land.

Most recently, Netanyahu has expanded Zionist settlements so as to undermine any possibility of a viable contiguous state in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and refused to release Palestinian prisoners as agreed in a previous deal.

“We expect the entire international community, at least its responsible members, to strongly oppose this

dictate to the UN and the Security Council,” Netanyahu said. “What we need is direct negotiations and not dictated terms.”

The resolution, drawn up by Jordan and backed by the 22-member Arab League, was so weak that the Palestinians had to revise it, calling for East Jerusalem to be the capital of Palestine and for an end to settlement-building in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. However, even the revised resolution failed to call for the Palestinians’ and their descendants’ right of return to their homes in Israel/Palestine.

The move by Abbas and his Fatah-dominated PA, backed by the Arab regimes, is a last-ditch attempt to preserve their credibility. They are desperate to prevent a third *intifada*, or popular uprising, which would be directed not just against Israel, but also against the PA.

The PA has faced increasing opposition from Palestinians, who have to deal on a daily basis with harassment, intimidation, violence, roadblocks and land expropriations from Israeli security forces and right-wing settlers. Sixty percent of the West Bank, known as Area C, is controlled by Israel’s military forces and is off limits to the Palestinians.

According to World Bank data, in June 2014—before Israel’s most recent assault on Gaza—the Palestinian economy was in recession. Unemployment had reached 26 percent: 16 percent on the West Bank and 45 percent in Gaza. More than a quarter of the Palestinians live in poverty, with the rate in Gaza double that of the West Bank.

These conditions are a bitter testimony to the fraud of the “peace process.”

Palestinians were enraged last June when Abbas allowed Israeli troops to take control of Ramallah, the PA’s main city, and use the PA police headquarters as its base of operations in the search for three missing Israeli settler teenagers and for rooting out Hamas supporters. After the Israeli army left, Palestinian protesters turned on the police, prompting a live fire response and the return of the Israeli military to help the police. The death of the teenagers was later used as the pretext to launch the war on Hamas in Gaza, a war the PA tacitly supported by suppressing popular opposition on the West Bank.

Abbas has justified his cooperation with Israel, claiming that it is in “the Palestinian national interest,” something he has even called “sacred.” By this, he

means the access to US and European funding, diplomatic audiences, and aid from donor agencies that cement the privileges of a tiny Palestinian elite.

Abbas’ subservience to US and Israeli interests has continued, even as Israel has mounted continuous provocations against the Palestinians. These include the killing last month of a Palestinian minister, Ziad Abu Ein, as he went unarmed to join a peaceful protest.

In the recent period, Israel has imposed increased restrictions on access to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, on some occasions banning Palestinian worshippers from entering. This is in deference to the wishes of Jewish zealots who, along with ultra-right-wing politicians of the Jewish Home Party in Netanyahu’s ruling coalition, have called for an end to rules banning Jews from praying at the site.

Last Monday, a Palestinian youth was shot dead by Israeli forces at a checkpoint south of Nablus in the northern West Bank. This brought to 50 the number of Palestinians killed by Israeli forces in the West Bank in 2014. If one includes those killed in Gaza as a result of Israel’s summer offensive, the total figure for 2014 climbs to 2,335.



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