The status of Palestine and the fight for votes

Arab League Secretary General Nabil al-Arabi said the other day that an expanded meeting with representatives from the Arab world and 27 European Union countries will take place at the League’s headquarters in Cairo on November 13. The main topic of discussion will be Palestine’s status in the UN.

Let’s try and understand what goals the PNA will pursue this time.

In the Vatican’s wake

Last year, the Palestinian leadership launched a massive worldwide public relations campaign for recognition of Palestinian statehood and full membership in the UN.

As we know, the effort was a failure. It went no further than Palestinian Autonomy head Mahmoud Abbas’s formal submission of an application to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

That outcome was not difficult to predict. After all, the General Assembly acts based on the recommendation of the UN Security Council. Washington peremptorily said that it would veto the declaration and prevent it from moving forward (the declaration must be adopted in the Security Council and then sent to the General Assembly, where it can be approved or rejected by a simple majority).

Evidently understanding that a cavalry charge at this stage would fail, the Palestinians decided on a gentler approach.

They followed the Vatican’s example. In July 2004, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution expanding the Vatican’s involvement in its affairs, recognizing that as an observer nation the Holy See should be given rights and privileges of participation in UN sessions and international conferences sponsored by the General Assembly.

The resolution also gave the Vatican delegation new rights, particularly the so-called “right of response,” under which delegates are allowed to respond to speeches made during debates, and the right to take part in each year’s general political discussion involving heads of state.

For the Palestinians’ Vatican strategy to succeed, of course, they need first to win over the United States. That is key to their entire campaign.

Therefore, it is no wonder that almost immediately after Obama was elected to a second term PNA leaders were among the first to congratulate US President and once again remind him of his promise to do everything he could to
facilitate a peace treaty between Israel and Palestine within the 1967 borders. And in its message of congratulations, Ramallah expressed the hope that this time Washington would not block Palestine’s attempt to elevate its status in the UN.

However, Washington is not the only obstacle to Palestinian aspirations. The EU still has quite a solid group of “Palestine skeptics.”

“Palestine skeptics” and “Palestine optimists”

Germany, Italy and the Netherlands are the EU’s main “Palestine skeptics.” It was their commitment to principles of the past that prevented a common position on the Palestine resolution from being worked out at the informal EU foreign ministers summit in Sopot, Poland last year.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s statement during last year’s Germany visit by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sums up their position very nicely: An independent Palestine must emerge from bilateral negotiations, not the UN.

Yet it must be acknowledged that the position of Europe’s Palestine skeptics is growing weaker by the month.

A few days before the UN General Assembly session began last fall, Cyprus, Greece, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, Ireland, Malta, Portugal and Spain openly expressed their willingness to support the pro-Palestine resolution.

Also, Iceland recognized Palestine’s independence last December, becoming the first West European country to take that step.

However, there are nuances in those countries’ official statements on the issue. Some — Cypriot President Dimitris Christofias — for example, were quite specific (recognition of Palestinian statehood within the 1967 borders, with the capital in East Jerusalem). Other pro-Palestinian European countries (Spain, Portugal, Greece and Malta, for example) were less definitive.

It is also noteworthy that there has recently been a greater tendency to improve the status of Palestinian diplomatic missions in Europe, as Sweden and Belgium have done, for example.

In general, the trend is clear. As Luxembourg’s Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn said, the least Europeans should do is work towards UN observer status for Palestine. “We cannot give them nothing,” he stressed.

France’s position may be decisive; its previous leader had proposed the Vatican option to the Palestinians. The French proposal also calls for admitting the Palestinians to the International Criminal Court in The Hague, which would let them file claims against Israel.

With Netanyahu realizing that Palestinian leaders have actually latched onto the French initiative, it is no wonder that the lion’s share of the talks during his recent official visit to France was devoted to the Palestinian issue.

It is difficult to say whether Netanyahu was able to win Paris over. Some think he succeeded. As confirmation, they point to the Israeli media, which relishes French President François Hollande’s statement that unilateral actions by Palestinian leaders do not contribute to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

However, we should not forget that Israel’s parliamentary election campaign is in full swing. As we know, during the elections the amount of objective information coming out of the media falls off drastically.

For internal consumption

In general, the Israeli elections can play a significant role in Ramallah’s current effort to upgrade Palestine’s status in the United Nations and may therefore affect the balance of power in Palestinian political circles.

After all, everyone understands that the PNA’s present leadership is in dire need of a “splendid little war.” That is especially true after Fatah’s lack of success in the October municipal elections (which Hamas boycotted), Qatari Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani’s “momentous” visit to Hamas’s “fiefdom” — the Gaza Strip — and the increased political heft of the Islamic Resistance Movement on the Palestinian street and throughout the Arab world.

To keep its ratings up on the eve of the elections, therefore, Israel’s ruling party will attempt to defeat the Palestinian initiative using the tactics it has already worked out (trips to European capitals; use of the European media, influential politicians and non-governmental organizations to shape opinion; use of international lawyers; and
A Netanyahu-Lieberman success could finish off Fatah for good and put Hamas in power throughout all of Palestine, with all the difficulties that entails for Israel.

But that should not bother the likely winner of Israel’s parliamentary elections next January. After all, the greater the reach of radical organizations like Hamas on Israel’s borders, the more electoral support there will be for Israel’s right wing.

Vitaly Nikolayevich Bilan holds a Candidate of Science (History) degree and is an expert on the Middle East. This article was written expressly for New Eastern Outlook.