



Palestine vote a difficult choice



ALAN KIRK
FOREIGN EDITOR

In the next few weeks, the Gillard Government may have to decide between backing a traditional friend on the world stage and putting first its own ambition to have a greater say in world affairs.

When the United Nations General Assembly meets in New York, Palestinian leaders plan to put forward a resolution asking for their lands to be recognised as the world's newest state.

The move has the backing of two-thirds of the UN's 190 or so members but has provoked a furious response from the Israelis and their main backer, the US.

Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak has predicted the new state would claim borders that prevailed before 1967. This would include East Jerusalem, which was annexed by Israel.

He has warned of a tsunami of diplomatic problems as Israeli troops occupied the territory of a fellow UN member.

And the US, whose veto on Security Council resolutions does not extend to the General Assembly, has threatened to withdraw funding from the UN if the vote goes through.

But there is support for the general terms of the resolution — the wording has not been released — from within Australia as well as around the world.

For a start, it is a peaceful strategy and very different from the plane hijackings, bus bombings and rocket attacks

which have characterised Palestinian tactics for much of the past 60 years.

And it comes as ordinary people across the Middle East and North Africa are energised by the Arab Spring, which has toppled despots and inspired millions with the idea of taking more control of their lives.

Heated negotiations are taking place in Washington involving the Israelis and Palestinians to find a way of putting off the vote.

If they fail, Australia's dilemma will be whether to back Israel and the US by voting no, backing the Palestinians by voting yes, or backing itself by abstaining.

Backing the Palestinians is a non-starter but, so the argument goes, abstaining would help Australia gain vital Second and Third World nations' votes for the seat it covets on the Security Council.

It has been reported that Foreign Affairs Minister Kevin Rudd wants to abstain but Prime Minister Julia Gillard insists on backing Israel.

Officially, no decision will be made until the wording of the resolution can be examined.

Fremantle Labor MHR Melissa Parke, who spent 2½ years working for the UN relief agency in Gaza, said: "It would be a great moral force for the General Assembly to found a state for the Palestinians.

"I think the Palestinians have shown good faith in building up their institutions. Peace is greater

than existed in Northern Ireland when its peace agreement was signed."

Ms Parke argues that the benefits would be great for Palestinians in the West Bank who struggle with the effects of military occupation and whose tribulations go from the major — such as being cut off from their productive lands — to the minor.

"They can't build a vegie patch without Israeli permission," Ms Parke said.

In the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, the Israeli-imposed isolation and blockade had been counterproductive, she said.

All this while Israel continues to build settlements on Palestinian land occupied illegally under international law.

Ordinary Israelis are mostly opposed to the push for Palestinian statehood, Efraim Inbar, one of Israel's leading specialists on defence and strategic issues, said.

"The Palestinians will get their decision at the UN but what does it mean? Nothing on the ground," Professor Inbar, who visited Perth last week, said. "It doesn't make the Palestinians any more adept at building a state than before."

Any new Palestine would fail the first test of statehood — the monopoly use of force, he said.

The plethora of militias operating in the West Bank and Gaza — linked to the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, Islamists and armed clans — meant the new



state would not have even the most basic control over its population.

The Palestinian Authority only existed in the West Bank because Israeli military incursions subdued rival Hamas militants.

Professor Inbar said: "We believe the UN resolution will only strengthen Palestinian intransigence. We may see a miscalculation on their part in terms of violence or a new intifada."

Among some Arab commentators criticism of the bid for statehood is even more savage.

Author Ali Abunimah wrote in an editorial on the Al Jazeera website: "What do you do if your decades-long campaign to bring about an independent Palestinian state on those fractions of historic Palestine known as the West Bank and Gaza Strip have resulted in total failure?"

"The answer seems to be, if you are the Western-sponsored Palestinian Authority in Israeli-occupied Ramallah, to pretend you have a Palestinian state anyway and to get as many other countries to join in this charade as possible."

Steve Liebliich, a spokesman for

WA's Jewish Community Council, said the Palestinian Authority was sustained by the twin pillars of terrorism and international aid. He is urging the Government to vote no if the resolution is moved at the UN, expected on September 20.

"Australia would make itself an accomplice to this farcical situation if it abstained," he said.

Instead, Australia should support efforts towards a negotiated settlement.

Ms Parke, however, is more optimistic about a new Palestine and points to reports from the UN, the European Union and the World Bank saying that the Palestinians are ready to have their own state.

"I think it can be viable if it is allowed to be viable," she said. "It cannot continue to be subject to occupation and it has to be able to control its own borders and economy."

In my view, the decision Australia has to make comes down in part to a cold assessment of where our interests lie. To paraphrase former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger,

Australia has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests.

It is by no means certain that abstaining at the UN would be enough to get us on the Security Council. But the effort should not be dismissed.

The Palestinians may get recognition as a state, possibly even a sham state doomed to failure. But it is a heavy responsibility for the world to say they should not have one.

Decades of international efforts to encourage peace talks failed.

Israeli leaders may fear the diplomatic fallout but they have ignored UN resolutions before without calamity. For ordinary Israelis struggling with domestic issues, the chances of disastrous consequences are low.

Abstaining would send a message that we believe the grinding process of peaceful nation-building can yield results.

Ms Parke is right in saying: "Having peace between independent states of Israel and Palestine living side by side offers great benefits to Israel. These two great peoples deserve peace."

✉ alan.kirk@wanews.com.au



Violence: Analysts are divided on whether UN backing for a Palestinian state would reduce bombings. Picture: Associated Press