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UN-EU-ropean lessons^(**)

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What previous EU voting at the UN teaches us about the forthcoming Palestinian bid?

Above all other considerations the EU member states votes during the September UN General Assembly session still remain unknown. The European Union is possibly the most influential international body still undecided on how it will respond to the Palestinian plan, depending on its details. Weakened by divisions, often debilitated by playing a US dummy the EU still has a chance to speak in unison but it will probably not. Here are two lessons that provide interesting examples on how the EU had previously dealt with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the UN.

Goldstone lesson. In November 2009 the EU member countries voted on the Goldstone report (critical of IDF conduct during the Gaza war in 2008/2009) in the GA in a three way fashion: 15 countries abstained (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Romania, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom), 5 were in favour (Cyprus, Ireland, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia), 7 against (Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia)¹. All this took place despite the Swedish EU presidency's initiative for all EU countries to abstain amid the controversies about the report. The Goldstone report vote begs a question of whether the same split will occur during the possible September vote. In the run-up to the GA Goldstone vote there had been intense diplomatic lobbying by the Americans and Israelis to divide the EU vote, which eventually succeeded. Similar lobbying action has been undertaken in the run-up to the September 2011 vote, although this time not only the anti-statehood campaign had been devised but also the Palestinians have been much more energetic in galvanizing support for their cause. Another analogy with the November 2009 Goldstone vote is that President Abbas was then presumably convinced by the US to abandon the GA vote on the report. If the Palestinians are convinced to relinquish their UN bid they would have to get new terms of reference vis-à-vis Israel in the negotiations or else Mahmoud Abbas is facing yet another, possibly worse outcry at home than the one sparked by the Goldstone report.

Settlements lesson. The current UN Security Council has 5 permanent member states (US, Russia, China, France, UK) and 10 non-permanent members (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Colombia, Gabon, Germany, India, Lebanon, Nigeria, Portugal, South Africa). Out of 15 members 4 are EU members and they all voted in favour of the February 2011 SC resolution condemning the Is-

¹ General Assembly, *GA/10883*, 5 November 2009, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/ga10883.doc.htm>.

raeli settlements on occupied territories, as did all other SC members except the US who vetoed the resolution², using its veto power for the first time in the Obama administration. The resolution was sponsored by at least 120 countries and earlier in December 2010 a GA resolution on Israeli settlements called on cessation of all Israeli settlement activities by a majority of 169 votes to 6 against with 2 abstentions³. All 27 EU countries voted in favour of the resolution.

The conclusion then is that while the potential for a united EU vote is there (as shown by the Settlements vote), when it comes to controversial decisions, especially those that set a precedent and can potentially but realistically harm Israel's interests (Goldstone vote), the EU does not vote un-animously given different and often conflicting interests with the parties to the conflict.

The ultimate interest of all EU countries, EU presidency and the High Representative Catherine Ashton should be European unity with regard to the Palestinian UN bid. Given the controversies the easiest way to achieve it would be to unanimously abstain if the Palestinians ask for UN membership. Bilateral relations of EU member states with Israel and the Palestinians are after all of different scope, intensity and warmth. It would be the first time when 27 countries spoke with one voice on such a disputed issue. If, however, the Palestinians ask for anything less the EU should vote favourably in accordance with previous statements and decisions. A walk-out is possibly the worst option of all as it shows ultimate disregard for the UN forum.

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² *Israeli settlements: US vetoes UNSC resolution*, BBC, 19 February 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12512732>.

³ Against: Israel, Marshall Islands, Micronesia (Federated States of), Nauru, Palau, United States. Abstain: Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Panama. Absent: Antigua and Barbuda, Burundi, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominica, Equatorial Guinea, Kiribati, Rwanda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Suriname, Vanuatu. All other states were in favour, including all 27 EU member countries. <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2010/ga11035.doc.htm>.