I was pleased to spend some time as an ‘expert’ with the Lebanese delegation in September, when Lebanon held the rotating Presidency of the Security Council. One of the hottest issues was the question of Palestinian membership at the UN, and I was able to catch a glimpse of the proceedings from within. On one occasion, I was invited by the Lebanese Ambassador to the UN, Nawaf Salam, who was also a former colleague of mine in the Department of Political Studies and Public Administration at AUB, to join him in the office of the President of the Security Council (a room that is near to both the formal and informal consultations rooms). The Palestine Ambassador, accompanied by a delegation representing a segment of Palestinian civil society, were scheduled to officially hand to the President of the Security Council the ‘Palestine seat’--literally, a chair, apparently made from Jerusalem olive wood and upholstered in Nablus with a UN-blue velvet, with the words “PALESTINE” at the top followed by “Palestine’s Right--A Full Membership in the United Nations”. Solemn words were exchanged between the Palestine delegation members and Ambassador Salam, but once the official exchange was done and the videos and cameras turned off, there were knowing glances that this was only the beginning of a long and likely arduous process given the clear opposition of the United States--the seat was hurriedly removed from the room lest someone from the US delegation showed up! It was clear to me then, even as I attended the subsequent press conference just outside the UN’s inner chambers, that the Palestinian delegation did not really have a firm grip on what was going on, and did not even know if they could obtain a majority vote in the SC (to force the US to cast its veto blocking full Palestinian membership at the UN) or if they should just settle on submitting a status upgrade within the General Assembly. After all, the chair was a marketing stunt supported by the PA, designed to woo civil society within liberal civil society in Europe. Much less care was taken in terms of substance, or indeed tapping into the considerable talent and resources available within Palestinian community. As such, vocal opposition emanated from within segments of the wider Palestinian community that considers the PA incompetent and undemocratic; and fears the consequences of the PA’s initiative on the Palestinian right of return, the role of the PLO as representative of all Palestinians, and the unilateral ceding of Palestinian land and rights to Israel.

As I left the UN that day, it seemed apparent to me that the PA’s main goal was to preserve a role for itself in a struggle in which it had largely become irrelevant since the secret Oslo Accords established it in 1993. The statehood bid was not wrong in principle; but it was rushed by a group of Palestinian leaders that had long ago lost much of its credibility in local and international circles. More importantly, the legal, political and social consequences for Palestinians, it seemed to me, were ill-studied, particularly for the most vulnerable segments, namely the refugees. I came away feeling, once again, that the Palestinian struggle was too profound to be handled so haphazardly by such limited leaders within the PA. Chair or no chair.