



*INSS Insight* No. 656, January 15, 2015

## **The Palestinian Cause in the International Arena:**

### **The Case of Sri Lanka**

**Shlomi Yass**

On January 8, 2015, Sri Lanka held its presidential election. Mahinda Rajapaksa, who won the presidency in 2005 and was reelected in 2010, ran against Maithripala Sirisena, who favors a pro-Western policy and earned the support of retired politicians and leaders of the minority parties. In the background of the election was a drop in the incumbent's popularity, claims of corruption, and longstanding ethnic tensions in the country. Sirisena won with 51.28 percent of the vote, against Rajapaksa's 47.58 percent. In his swearing-in ceremony, Sirisena announced he would decentralize presidential authorities and empower the parliament, the cabinet, and the judiciary, create a national unity government, and abolish a host of current media restrictions.

Interestingly, the Palestinian question was on the Sri Lankan agenda during the election campaign and politicians sought to use it to enlist support. For example, an essay published on the *Asian Tribune* website during the campaign entitled "Mahinda Rajapaksa: Muslims and Palestinian Solidarity" scathingly criticized leaders of Muslim political parties that had defected to the opposition. It went so far as to claim they had "betrayed" the President. The writer wondered: "Could they have found a better friend for the Palestinian cause than President Rajapaksa?" This blunt language is evidence of the important role played by the Palestinian question in Sri Lankan public opinion.

The interest shown by the Sri Lankan political system in the Palestinians is not new. In July 1970, Sri Lanka cut its diplomatic ties with Israel, claiming that Israel was refusing to comply with Security Council Resolution 242, which called for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from territories occupied in the Six Day War. As a young member of parliament, former President Rajapaksa supported the resolution, expressing deep solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for independence. He was also a key figure in opening the PLO embassy in the capital city of Colombo in July 1975. A year later, he founded the Sri Lanka-Palestine Solidarity Committee, an organization he proceeded to lead for almost three decades. In an interview to Wafa, the Palestinian news agency, he said, "As a member of parliament and president of the association, I was involved in the

opening of the PLO embassy. This made it possible for us to answer the accusations of the Zionist lobby that tried to depict the PLO as a terrorist organization.” Yasir Arafat visited Sri Lanka in March 1997, where he was greeted as a head of state and met with then President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga. Arafat proposed his mediation services in the resolution of the conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers, the terrorist organization that until its defeat in May 2009 was active in establishing an independent Tamil state in the northeastern part of the island. Rajapaksa, who met with Arafat on during his 1997 visit, later stated, “I am happy to say that he was one of the greatest leaders in the world,” and “every political leader should emulate [his] rare qualities.”

Relations between Israel and Sri Lanka were renewed in 2000. Rajapaksa did not *end* them when elected in 2005, perhaps because by then Israel was a key supplier of armaments and counter-insurgency knowledge important to the country’s fight against the Tamil Tigers. *Nonetheless*, in 2007 he opened a Sri Lankan mission in Ramallah and appointed Dr. T. Jayasinghe to head it, making the latter Colombo’s first ambassador to Palestine. In October 2008, Rajapaksa hosted Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in Sri Lanka for the first time. Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyadh al-Malki, former Foreign Minister Ziyad Abu Amar, and Nabil Abu Rudeinah, Abbas’s spokesman and a member of the PLO’s Central Committee, also participated in that meeting.

In February 2012, a Sri Lankan delegation headed by Rajapaksa’s son Namal arrived in Ramallah to meet with heads of the Palestinian Agency for Investment Promotion and Palestinian business leaders from the private sector. Two months later, Abbas made his second visit to Sri Lanka, together with Foreign Minister Riyadh al-Malki. In January 2014, Rajapaksa returned the gesture by paying his first visit to the Palestinian Authority (as part of a three-part itinerary that also included Jordan and Israel) and was greeted by Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and Palestinian Ambassador to Sri Lanka Anwar al-Agha. Foreign Minister al-Malki stated that the visit was “historic in all its dimensions” and reflected “a milestone in the special *relationship* between Sri Lanka and Palestine.” Rajapaksa laid a wreath on Arafat’s grave; received the Star of Palestine, the highest Palestinian commendation; *viewed* the Mahinda Rajapaksa Road outside the Sri Lankan mission in Ramallah, named in his honor in 2007; met with leaders of the Palestinian business community; and attended mass at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

Sri Lankan support for the Palestinian cause is likewise evident on the international arena. While Abbas visited Sri Lanka in 2008, Rajapaksa stated that, “Sri Lanka has chaired the U.N. Committee on Human Rights of Palestinians for 38 years continuously. It is a unique record, especially since Sri Lanka is a non-Muslim country.” In 2011, Sri Lanka supported the PA’s joining UNESCO as a full-fledged member, and Rajapaksa

supported the Palestinians in all six speeches he addressed to the UN General Assembly. In February 2013, then-Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad met with Sri Lanka Foreign Minister G. L. Peiris and thanked him for Sri Lanka's support for the PA in the November 2012 UN General Assembly vote on Resolution 67/19, granting Palestine the non-member observer status in the United Nations. In the 69<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in September 2014, Rajapaksa reiterated "Sri Lanka's support for the early realization of a sovereign, independent, viable and united State of Palestine, existing within secure and recognized borders, side-by-side and at peace with Israel." In a meeting with Abbas on the sidelines of the General Assembly, he declared that Sri Lanka decided to donate \$1 million to the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip following Operation Protective Edge.

For its part, the PA has supported Sri Lanka for many years in UN committee sessions in Geneva devoted to human rights and discussions of accusations about the role played by the Sri Lankan government and army in the war against the Tamil Tigers. In September 2009, a series of discussions between the Sri Lankan Ambassador to Palestine and al-Malki and his deputy were held with the intention of raising money from the Arab League for Sri Lanka. Some 90 percent of the tea sold in the PA is imported from Sri Lanka, and many Sri Lankan tourists visit Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

From Israel's perspective, the new presidency in Colombo could signal the potential for some improvement in relations with Sri Lanka. While Sri Lanka's relatively marginal position on the international arena means that an improvement in bilateral relations will not greatly add to Israel's international standing, Sri Lanka nonetheless represents an example of a network of diplomatic and economic connections forged by the Palestinians with many nations across the world, including those lacking any direct influence on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the Israeli-Palestinian political process. The Sri Lankan example also demonstrates the effect of developments in internal political arenas on the status of the Palestinians in the international arena. In light of the political change in Sri Lanka, one cannot expect a severing of economic ties between Colombo and the PA, but presumably diplomatic relations will cool to some degree, which could be manifested in somewhat less enthusiastic Sri Lankan support for the Palestinian cause in the international arena, especially UN institutions.

