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# More than symbolic politics

## The recognition of Palestine as a state by a number of EU countries has created new momentum — bringing the two-state solution centre stage once more

The '7 October War' is a strategic turning point for Israeli-Palestinian bilateral relations as well as for Israel's regional and global alliances. The notion marketed by the Israeli government that Hamas was contained and deterred and that Israel could be integrated into the Middle East region without addressing the Palestinian issue – an idea that had been conveniently adopted by Western leaders – collapsed on that very day.

In the midst of so much bloodshed and destruction, talk of the need for a two-state solution has taken centre stage again. The announcement by Norway, Spain, Ireland and, most recently, Slovenia to recognise Palestine as a state has created new momentum. A potential recognition of the State of Palestine by Germany in the near future – ideally in coalition with France – could further ignite this momentum, possibly leading to broader European and UN recognition as well as the long-awaited two-state solution.

The developments of the last six months have underlined how irresponsible it was for the international community to neglect one of the most dangerous and volatile conflict areas. While the war in Gaza continued, the past six months have seen the principal global players, with the US at the helm, spring into action to contain the fighting and prevent it from spiralling out of control regionally and globally.

## Creating conditions for a sustainable peace

It is to be hoped that the international conversation on the 'day after' will dictate a strategic exit from this war that will bring about an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement based on the two-state paradigm. Still, it is a pity that this much bloodshed and destruction were needed to bring the international community back to its senses regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

When the fighting ends – soon, it is to be hoped – the suffering and devastation in Gaza, where some two-thirds of the population have become internally displaced and where the danger from Israeli bombardment is coupled with rising cases of disease and the threat of famine, will require both immediate and massive humanitarian attention and long-term planning. In addition to the loss of life and material damage, the hostilities are currently cementing the animosity and hatred between the two peoples with each passing day, making the need to end the fighting all the more urgent.

Beyond the end of the warfare and the reconstruction of Gaza, there is an imminent need to create conditions for *sustainable* peace based on principles that foster a political solution.

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The Gaza war should be brought to a halt in the shortest time possible, and it should be the last war ever fought between Israel and the Palestinians. To this end, the aim of any peace agreement must be strategic coexistence between the parties, based on the two-state solution and in line with all relevant UN resolutions. Relations between Israel and Palestine must be conducted within the boundaries of international law and with respect for human rights. These principles are non-negotiable and should be considered the fundamental framework of the political thrust to transform the historical enmity between the Israelis and the Palestinians into viable coexistence.

International recognition of the State of Palestine and its acceptance as a full member of the UN should precede and be separated from the success or failure of the peace process. The two parties in the negotiations should be granted equal international recognition. The State of Palestine should include the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its official capital. Full Palestinian membership in the UN will be based on compliance with the UN Charter, specifically Chapter II, Articles 4.1 and 4.2, which govern membership. If the Palestinian Authority is deemed deficient in meeting these terms, a roadmap with a fixed timetable should be drafted to guide the Palestinian Authority in making the necessary reforms.

The international community must draft a political roadmap that establishes the terms of reference for the negotiations as well as a

timetable for their conclusion. Incentives – but also disincentives – should be offered by the international community to the parties to bolster domestic support for the negotiations. The UN Security Council Resolution 2334 should be revisited and strengthened with a new resolution that builds on the principles adopted in December 2016 and reframes them in the context of geopolitical developments. Similarly, the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative should be updated to reflect regional changes over the past two decades. Together, the new resolution and the updated peace initiative should serve as the basis for the diplomatic scheme.

Another, though smaller, concern for the Israeli government at the moment is the sanctions imposed on extremist Israeli settlers who have violently attacked or committed human rights abuses against Palestinians in the West Bank. In Israel, this issue is considered to be related to the recognition of Palestinian. Leaders of the Israeli settlers are seen by the nationalistic part of Israeli society as modern pioneers — in other words, as national heroes. Restrictions on travelling to friendly countries or the ability to register bank accounts by prominent settlers are perceived as an international delegitimation of the settlements and Israel's control of the West Bank as a whole. These acts are symbolic but send an important signal that the international community can no longer accept impunity for acts of violence committed by settlers.

## A renewed momentum for Palestinian recognition

Prior to the recognition of Palestine as a state by Norway, Ireland and Spain, only four Western European countries – Iceland, Malta, Cyprus and Sweden – had recognised Palestine. But, internationally, a vast majority of over 140 countries out of the 193 UN member states have recognised Palestine as a state. And in 2012, it was recognised as a state by the UN General Assembly, but failed to gain recognition as a full member. To become a full member state, Palestine needs the approval of at least two-thirds of the UN General Assembly members and at least nine of the 15 UN Security Council members, with no vetoes from the five permanent members. This remains a high hurdle due to a likely US veto.

The last six months have dramatically changed Israel's international standing. The world is now more critical of the country and more vocal in its support for Palestinian self-determination. For the current Israeli government, the recognition of the State of Palestine by friendly countries is very worrying. The last thing the government wants to see is Palestinian statehood legitimised internationally. I would even say that

for today's Israeli leadership, this is nothing less than a nightmare.

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Despite harsh Israeli reactions, Spain and Norway can become meaningful players in fostering a new diplomatic momentum on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, building on their previous efforts, such as hosting the Madrid Peace Conference on the Middle East in 1991 and the negotiations leading to the Oslo Agreements.

Following French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Germany, these two countries should be next to recognise Palestine as a state to keep the two-state solution alive and give Palestinians hope for an end to the occupation and the fulfilment of their self-determination. Without this recognition, we risk falling into the same trap as in the post-Oslo phase, rendering all calls for a political solution mere lip service. At the same time, both countries could underline that the German-Franco axis is alive and capable of bringing the EU back as a decisive actor committed to international law in the Middle East.

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