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OPINION / EUROPEAN UNION

If not now, when should Europe recognise Palestine?

It is high time for European states to follow Sweden's lead and recognise Palestine's statehood.

by **Anders Persson**

18 hours ago



Israel deliberately picked diplomatic fights with Sweden by misinterpreting or exaggerating Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström's statements, writes Persson [Reuters]

Once again, European states are said to be on their way to recognise Palestine. Some reports talk about a big wave, others are more modest. Much seems to depend on whether France will take the lead, but President Emmanuel Macron said last month that France won't recognise Palestine at this point, which probably means that there will be no big wave, at least not in the foreseeable future. Slovenia is, in any case, expected to be the second EU member to recognise Palestine since Sweden did in 2014, even if the Slovenian president recently said the time was not ripe.

Cyprus and Malta have previously recognised Palestine, but that was before they joined the EU. A number of central European member states have also recognised Palestine, when they were part of the Soviet Union. Some of these states (the Visegrad four, with the Czech Republic, in particular) have today emerged as Israel's closest allies in Europe. Iceland, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Ukraine and the Vatican have also recognised Palestine, but they are not members of the EU.

Israel initially feared that the Swedish recognition would unleash similar recognition and punitive actions against its occupation of the Palestinian territories. It didn't happen, but the Swedish recognition did create a certain momentum for the Palestinians, as parliaments in a number of key EU member states (the UK, France, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Belgium and Italy) adopted resolutions supporting Palestinian statehood and calling for their governments to recognise Palestine.

Israel responded ferociously to Sweden's recognition of Palestine, a response which went far beyond using its three standard replies to unappreciated European critique, which were formulated by its legendary Foreign Minister Abba Eban already in the early 1970s: that the critique was ill-timed; that the critique was counterproductive; and that European countries should stop dictating the conditions for peace if they wanted to be relevant in the peace process.

In retrospect, the harsh response from the Israeli government seems to have been part of a deliberate strategy to deter other European states from following Sweden, which, up until now, has been very successful. When I have done interviews with Israeli officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem, they have openly admitted that Sweden was indeed "singled out for special treatment", without elaborating further. A key component in this strategy, whose contours remain unknown, seems to have been to deliberately pick diplomatic fights with Sweden by misinterpreting or exaggerating Sweden's Foreign Minister Margot Wallstrom's statements - something she believes Israel did deliberately.

ANNONS

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What other European countries can learn from Sweden's experience of recognising Palestine is to not wait for the EU, to be fact-based in all statements regarding the conflict, prepare for the Israeli counter-attacks and, if possible, do it together with other states to reduce the possibility for Israel to single them out for special negative treatment.

In the wake of November 2015 terror attacks in Paris, Wallstrom identified the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as one of the factors explaining why "there are so many people who have become radicalised". In December of the same year, she called for Israel to end "extrajudicial killings" of Palestinians. In response, Israel swiftly declared her persona non grata.

Any fair observer can compare Israel's response to what Swedish officials say and do regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with Israel's response to what Russian officials say and do regarding the conflict. There were, for example, no Israeli officials who dared to challenge Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov when he, in 2015 (just the day after Wallstrom spoke about the radicalising power of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in relation to the Paris terror attacks), said that Hamas and Hezbollah were not terrorist groups, even calling the latter a "legitimate sociopolitical" force in the Middle East.

Nothing of what Wallstrom has said in relation to either extrajudicial killings (also previously expressed by the EU during the second intifada), or the radicalising power of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is by any means anti-Semitic, and not really controversial, either, for well-informed analysts. For example, Israel's largest judicial scandal in modern times, the so-called Bus 300 affair from 1984, has been widely categorised by international observers as a case of extrajudicial killing. The same is true for the largest whistle-blowing scandal in Israel, the Anat Kamm case from 2008, where it was revealed that the Israeli military had killed Palestinians in direct contravention of the Israeli

Supreme Court's rulings. Last year, Israeli soldier Elor Azaria was found guilty of what Amnesty International called the "extrajudicial killing" of Hebron resident Abdel-Fattah al-Sharif.

Wallstrom was on safe ground even when it came to the radicalising power of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for Islamic terrorism. Two months after she brought this up in relation to the 2015 Paris terror attacks, the leader of the cell that carried out the attacks, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, said in his so-called martyr video that "With Allah's help we will be the ones who liberate Palestine." Before that, "the Palestine question" had been a central theme in Usama bin Laden's speeches, and likewise in his successor's, Ayman al-Zawahiri's, for over two decades.

The tragic and paradoxical reality is that, as the Palestinian Authority progressed towards statehood, from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s, Europe became less and less ready to recognise a Palestinian state, even if the EU, together with the UN, the World Bank and IMF declared in 2011 that the PA performed above the threshold for what was expected of a state. A European Commission official told my colleague Dimitris Bouris of the University of Amsterdam in 2010 that "Palestine is already better equipped in state-building than 70 percent of existing countries."

The EU had, in its Berlin Declaration from 1999, expressed its "readiness to consider the recognition of a Palestinian State in due course". A decade later, in 2010, the EU's commitment to recognise Palestine was downgraded to "when appropriate". When PA President Mahmoud Abbas demanded EU recognition for a Palestinian state during his recent visit to Brussels, EU diplomats told the press that recognition "is up to national governments to make, not for the EU as a whole". Other EU diplomats, in some contradiction, said that EU recognition could only "come as part of a peace settlement".

What other European countries can learn from Sweden's experience of recognising Palestine is to not wait for the EU, to be fact-based in all statements regarding the conflict, prepare for the Israeli counter-attacks and, if possible, do it together with other states to reduce the possibility for Israel to single them out for special negative treatment. Wallstrom's real problem was not about the facts in her statements, but that she stood almost alone in the West in her critique against some of Israel's policies, which made her an easy target for Israeli counter-attacks, but also for some unexpected praise. One of Israel's leading print journalists, Nahum Barnea of Ynet, wrote, for example, that Sweden struggled against the Israeli right-wing government in a way that the domestic left-wing opposition did not.

A big, known unknown is where the Trump administration stands on European recognition of Palestine, if it, indeed, has any position at all. Israel's diplomatic power and deterrence are, to a significant extent, based on having the support of the world's only superpower. If Trump takes an active position against recognition of Palestine, it will make it harder for European countries to follow Sweden. If he rudely threatens them, it is unlikely that they will follow through. Palestine is simply not that important to most of them. A big part of the Palestinians' historic misfortunes is that, while they have a worthy cause and much legitimacy, they do not have much power to leverage other countries themselves.

If the Palestinian state-building project fails, as it has been doing since Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad resigned in 2013, it will move the conflict out of the two-state solution paradigm and into an uncertain future. The big fear today among mainstream European policymakers, academics, intellectuals and others is of course not that a Palestinian state will be established too early, but that it will not be established at all.

Foreign Minister Wallström pointed to this after Sweden's recognition, when she said: "Some will state this decision comes too soon. I am afraid, rather, that it is too late." She followed this up with what some consider to be among the best Jewish quotes of wisdom: "If not now, when?" Finally, the foreign minister added that she hoped that the recognition would be a "positive injection into the dynamics of the Middle East peace process", and that other states would follow. Now for the first time, it seems that others will indeed follow. It is not a day too early that they do.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.
