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Why Should We Fear the Recognition of a Palestinian State?

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The question of recognition of Palestinian statehood has once again found its way onto the international agenda. In the inaugural address of the new Swedish government, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven of the Social Democratic Party declared his country's intention to recognize the Palestinian state. "The conflict between Israel and Palestine can only be solved with a two-state solution, negotiated in accordance with international law," he declared. "The two-state solution requires mutual recognition and a will to co-exist peacefully. Sweden will therefore recognize the state of Palestine." Following the Swedish statement, a resolution to recognize the Palestinian state was also passed by the British parliament with a decisive majority.

The Swedish Prime Minister's statement and the decision of the British Parliament have evoked a series of predictable responses. Palestinian spokespeople have welcomed the actions, whereas spokespeople for the U.S. government described them as "a premature step," though they have fallen short of rejecting them outright. On an official level, Israel has expressed its dissatisfaction by summoning Sweden's ambassador in Israel for an official reprimand. Israeli Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, had expressed his regret that the Swedish Prime Minister rushed into publicizing his views on the Israeli-Palestinian issue before studying the subject. According to Lieberman, had he been familiar with the issues at hand, he would have seen that in the past twenty years, the Palestinians were the obstacle to achieving an agreement. "...No step by an external element," Lieberman has been quoted as

saying, "will be an alternative to direct negotiations between the sides, as part of a comprehensive agreement between Israel and the Arab world..." Lieberman also articulated a sentiment recently voiced among senior Israeli politicians, according to which if the Swedish government is truly interested in current events in the Middle East, it would be well advised to focus on more pressing issues in the region.

It seems that Foreign Minister Lieberman and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are currently attempting to take advantage of the vicissitudes in the Middle East—first and foremost, the Islamic State organization—to promote agreements with the Arab world prior to any agreement with the Palestinians. More than twelve years after Israel's rejection of the Arab Peace Initiative, and despite the fact that acceptance of this initiative in principle could pave the way to peace with the Arab world, the Israeli leadership still believes in the possibility of advancing this aim without recognizing a Palestinian state or taking concrete measures toward its establishment. However, it is doubtful that the "moderate" pragmatic Sunni Arab camp will agree to negotiate agreements with Israel without the onset of serious and purposeful negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, despite the hardships facing this camp along with its interest in (secret) cooperation with Israel in facing the threat posed by radical Islam. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi recently stressed these obstacles to strengthening ties with Israel, despite the close security ties between the two countries and their common interests in many areas.

To appreciate just how slim the chances of renewing the dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians have become one need only consider the speeches recently delivered by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas before the U.N. General Assembly. What the two leaders have in common is a focus on the effort to ensure quiet on the domestic front while at the same time conducting a parallel effort in the international arena to place the blame for the political stalemate on the other party and to evade political decisions. Once again Abbas is attempting to shift international attention—which is currently almost entirely focused on the threat posed by the Islamic State—to the Palestinian issue and place blame for the political stalemate on Israel using harsh, controversial terminology, while threatening to petition the U.N. Security Council and other international entities in order to force Israel to return to the negotiating table. Prime Minister Netanyahu, on the other hand, is attempting to point out similarities and even equivalence between Hamas,

Hezbollah, and the Islamic State in order to remove the Palestinian issue from the agenda in favor of the establishment of a regional alliance, to include Israel, united around the joint aim of fighting the common threat posed by radical Islam.

Indeed, both sides are displaying no encouraging signs of a possible dialogue renewal. Nevertheless, despite the difficulty of assessing whether any other countries will follow in the footsteps of Sweden and the British parliament, and if so, how many, additional countries can be expected to recognize the Palestinian state, thereby increasing the pressure on Israel to return to negotiations aimed at realizing the goal of establishing a Palestinian State.

This brings us to the question of whether it could be worthwhile for Israel to reconsider the question of recognition and cease the patently futile effort to prevent other countries from recognizing Palestinian statehood. Indeed, is there any basis for the concern that recognition will lend legitimacy to concrete international actions aimed at establishing a Palestinian state without Israeli consent and under conditions that are undesirable for Israel? After all, with Israel still in control of the West Bank, recognition of Palestinian statehood will not automatically lead to the establishment of such a state or the demarcation of its borders. The Palestinians' declaration of statehood in 1988 was also followed by recognition by many countries, and in 2012 a large majority in the U.N. General Assembly recognized a Palestinian state. These actions, however, did not impact the status quo in the territories themselves. On the other hand, a change in Israel's position will likely take the wind out of the Palestinians' sails. Furthermore, it may demonstrate to the countries that are important to Israel and relevant to the political process that Israel's support of the two-state solution is genuine and reiterate that such a solution can only be actualized as the result of negotiations between the two sides. This would also save the Israeli government significant energy by avoiding a political campaign that may not generate significant diplomatic dividends. One should note that in 1999, when Israel did not respond to Palestinian threats of declaring the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, it was actually Israeli statements regarding the benefits of Israeli recognition of Palestinian statehood that caused the Palestinian leadership to relinquish the idea.

Recognition of a Palestinian state will not have a detrimental impact on Israel's security interests. However, an expanding trend of international recognition of

Palestinian independence will create pressure for the renewal of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. If Prime Minister Netanyahu is serious about his support for a two state solution through negotiation, he should respond positively to the calls being voiced throughout the international community to resume talks. Israeli recognition of Palestinian statehood could also make it easier to return to the negotiating table – that is, unless Netanyahu and his partners in the government are being guided purely by domestic political considerations, most importantly the desire to keep the coalition intact.

In conclusion, since the campaign that took place last summer in the Gaza Strip (Operation Protective Edge), there have been calls to take advantage of its outcome in general, and the blow sustained by Hamas in particular, in order to open new possibilities in the Israeli-Palestinian arena by facilitating the Palestinian Authority's return to the Gaza Strip, among other things. Restoration of the P.A.'s control over the Gaza Strip will be manifested in the administration of civilian affairs and the beginning of a renewed security presence in the strip, despite Hamas's reluctance to surrender its military control over the Gaza Strip. The chances of success in this direction are currently unclear. What is clear, however, is the fact that they will have no chance whatsoever of succeeding unless the Ramallah-based Palestinian leadership is recognized by Israel as a political and strategic partner in both theory and practice. The Palestinian leadership will be unwilling to take the risks involved in an endeavor that may fail, unless it is convinced of a concrete and comprehensive plan aimed at establishing a Palestinian state. Recognition of a Palestinian state can be a first step in this direction.

