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## Europe moves on recognition of the Palestinian State

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The Saudi and French initiative in late July produced the New York declaration on the peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine and the implementation of the two-state solution. This was endorsed by an overwhelming vote in favour at the UN general assembly on 12th September.

The stage is now set for several Western states to declare recognition of the State of Palestine at the UN General Assembly meetings now underway in New York. This article looks at the situation in Europe, where a number of states have already recognised Palestine, most recently Ireland, Norway, Spain and Slovenia earlier this year, and others intend to do so in New York.

### **So, why have European States changed their view?**

For some time, many EU countries, as well as the UK, took the view that recognition was something that would be granted once peace negotiations with Israel had reached a stage when confidence had been built to the point where Israel itself would accept a Palestinian State on its border.

Many have, rightly in this writer's view, criticised this approach as it implied that recognition should be seen as some sort of 'reward' for Palestinian commitment to peace, and that if the international community is serious about a two-state solution, talks should begin, rather than end, with two internationally recognised states.

But now, given numerous statements of intent by the Netanyahu government, it is abundantly clear that Israel has no intention of engaging in any meaningful ceasefire, let alone a peace process, having adopted what can only be described as a one-sided military 'solution' to the conflict, including the devastation of Gaza and aggressive moves toward annexation of the West Bank,



including numerous violent acts by extremist settlers against the Palestinian population there.

European public opinion has reacted strongly to these events, with frequent well attended demonstrations across the continent calling for measures to be taken to restrain Israeli aggression, including recognition, and several civil society efforts, notably by National and European parliamentarians and former European Ambassadors, 325 of the latter signing a public demarche in early September demanding action on the part of European leaders and governments.



The recent finding by the UN Commission of Enquiry that in its campaign in Gaza, Israel has violated four out of the five conditions that constitute genocide under the international convention, as well as the attack on Qatar has only intensified the criticism of Israel around the continent. Passions are now running very high.

Against that background, President Macron announced some months ago that France was ready to recognise Palestine, a highly significant move by a major EU state with a long history of involvement in the region. He was followed by the UK, Luxembourg and Malta. Belgium has announced its intention to do so, though this is conditioned by the release of the Israeli hostages, and Portugal is considering its position. It is thus likely that there will soon be a majority of the 27 EU member states plus the UK, who recognise.

One important EU country is unlikely to move: Germany, labours under the collective guilt dating back to the second world war and has long been Israel's staunchest ally in Europe. Hungary, always an outlier in EU affairs, and a couple of central European states are also likely to back the Israeli position.

A key 'swing state', namely Italy has yet to give an indication that it will move to recognition, for reasons that are not entirely clear, but may be related to Prime Minister Meloni's desire to maintain what she considers a special relationship with the Trump administration. The latter is of course fiercely against recognition and has hinted at reprisals against those who decide to do it.

## The position at EU level

At EU level, there have been frequent declarations calling for restraint, but divisions within the bloc have prevented it from acting on them. To note that recognition of a state is not something that lies within the EU's purview as such, as it remains something under the authority of the individual member states.

However, that may soon change, following EU Commission President Von der Leyen's recent proposal to take measures against Israel: above all the suspension of the preferential EU-Israel trade agreement, something that could be achieved by a majority vote of EU states. This would be a highly significant move, in that fully one third of Israel's total trade is with the EU.



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The issue is all the more important to the EU, as it prepares to announce a new Pact for its relations with the Mediterranean, due in mid-October. Absent real action on the middle east conflict, this new flagship programme, which will involve important initiatives in key areas like migration management and security, it could well have a difficult passage when it comes to relations with the Arab world.

As regards the position of Arab states, there is widespread admiration in Europe of the strong and principled stand taken by Saudi Arabia, which has been very clear that there is no prospect of 'normalisation' with Israel so long as the conflict continues, and Palestinian self-determination is denied. At the same time, many Europeans question why those Arab countries that have signed 'Abraham' accords are hesitating to suspend them, given their condemnation of Israeli actions.

### What difference would recognition make?

It is widely known in Europe that recognition in itself may not serve to improve the situation on the ground. Nonetheless, it is seen as an important symbolic act, sending a message of hope to the Palestinians, as well as a sign that Europeans are fully committed to a two-state solution.

At the same time, when added to the various measures that are already being taken at national or EU level, such as arms export restrictions and sanctions on Israeli extremists, and boycotts of

cultural events in which Israel would normally participate, notably Eurovision, recognition adds weight to the message to Israel that maintaining its current course will lead only to yet greater political isolation and eventually, economic pain.

Looming over much of this change in European attitudes is the fragile state of transatlantic relations, and the desire to keep the US onside, or at least unobstructive when it comes to Europe's prime preoccupation, that is of course the need to support Ukraine in its resistance to the Russian invasion of its territory, and the overall threat to European stability now posed by the Kremlin.

How far the Trump administration is prepared to go in shielding its Israeli ally from European action remains to be seen, but European politicians are intensely aware of how the accusations of double standards vis-à-vis Gaza and Ukraine are damaging their relations both with the MENA region and in the wider world, and this, added to the EU's professed commitment to the rules-based order is a powerful driver for their stance on the middle east.



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