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Opinion – Between Food Drops and State Recognition, End Palestinian and Israeli Suffering First

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ALEXANDER LOENGAROV, AUG 6 2025

The past few weeks have seen an outpour of consternation over reports of hunger and starvation in the Gaza Strip. In some but far from all cases, the outrage also concerned the captivity and conditions in which Hamas and other militant Palestinian groups have held 50 Israeli and foreign hostages – alive or deceased – for over 660 days. At the same time, governments in many western countries have found themselves in a balancing act regarding the recognition of Palestinian statehood, with France having decided to proceed with such a recognition, and the United Kingdom and Canada using it as bargaining chips to elicit changes in Israeli behavior. From its side, the US administration has announced to take into account Canada's Middle East turnaround in its own trade negotiations with Ottawa. In other countries, the recognition issue risks to upend a long-standing national consensus, as in Germany, or to undermine the stability of a painstakingly formed government, like in Belgium.

Nevertheless, as before, international actors often fail to address the root causes of the horrors on the ground, even if (or perhaps precisely because) these causes form a decades-old and complicated tangle of mutual responsibilities, actions and reactions (as well as inaction). Therefore, it bears repeating that – notwithstanding comparisons and generalizations made justly or unjustly – the issue boils down to the national aspirations of two different population groups within largely the same sliver of land. The matter is eminently political at its core, although it also has an important societal component. Unfortunately, the political and societal issue has become a violent and military one – even long before October 7, 2023 – and has recently turned into one of a dire humanitarian nature.

Even so, contention has erupted over the nature of the humanitarian situation in Gaza, with the Israeli Defense Forces blaming Hamas for orchestrating a false propaganda campaign around famine. However, it would be both nonsensical and immoral to claim that the Strip's population would not be suffering after 22 months of war. Images, also Israeli ones, have shown the degrees of destruction (although not in all areas equally), and Israel effectively prevented any humanitarian aid from entering the Strip between March 2 and mid-May, 2025. Also, other Israeli sources sketch a more complicated picture about the reality on the ground and the use of footage from Gaza. What is important to realize, however, is that the battle over public perception is not benefitting anyone facing the horrendous conditions firsthand.

Similarly, further episodes in the controversy around the recognition of Palestinian statehood are unlikely to propel meaningful change in the short term. Whereas more concerted recognition by western countries may increase the international and domestic pressure on Israel's government, it may also produce further polarization between and within these countries, while at the same time antagonizing large numbers of Jewish Israelis, for whom the ongoing hostage crisis and the October 7 trauma are still very real. Most importantly, the formal act of recognition of statehood by a foreign country does not lead, in itself, to new or better state institutions, greater security, or more humane living conditions.

What, then, can and should the United States and international actors do? First and foremost, bring an end to all suffering as speedily as possible. While this is of course easier said than done, it is crucial that the focus of both policy-makers and the general public lie with the true needs on the ground. On the Palestinian side, that means basic humanity and safety for civilians in Gaza as well as in the West Bank. As the emergence of Hamas and other armed

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groups is intrinsically linked to the political question mentioned earlier, any sustainable solution cannot be purely military in nature.

If there was a military logic for Israel's "Swords of Iron" operation in Gaza, the country should understand that the Israeli-Palestinian issue demands a political process. Therefore, the US, Europe and Arab countries will need to preside over staged and gradual negotiations, which must also include guarantees for the Israeli side: only with a return of all the hostages and safeguards against any future terror attacks, Israeli society will be able to initiate a healing process, both in relation to its Palestinian neighbors and internally.

Unfortunately, neither Hamas nor the current Israeli government appears to be conducive to the above. Amidst the death and destruction in Gaza, the Palestinian armed group continues to recruit new fighters. On the Israeli side, PM Benjamin Netanyahu – who in late 2023 responded negatively to the question whether the reestablishment of Israeli settlements in Gaza was an option, now relies – for his own political survival and to keep him out of jail – on coalition members who are just aching to assert sovereignty over the Strip and the West Bank.

Against this backdrop, as more often, international actors need to find the right mix of sticks and carrots. They should make clear to both sides that allowing the situation to drag on will only lead to more suffering for all. This is something which both the Israeli and Palestinian public have confirmed in polls to have understood. Next, while mutual mistrust still towers high, certain prospects – like regional integration for Israelis or recognition of the "Nakba" for Palestinians – seem to predispose both sides a bit more favorably towards each other. These are the kind of elements that official and public diplomacy must play out, as they correspond to the real needs of the affected populations. Once such a process – however cautious – is initiated, one can hope there will no longer be a need for aid drops or inconclusive debates over recognition.

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