

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Opinion – International Recognition of Palestine and the Risk of a West Bank “Frontier”

<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/10/07/opinion-international-recognition-of-palestine-and-the-risk-of-a-west-bank-frontier/>

JAMES RON, OCT 7 2025

In September 2025 alone, ten states – including Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Portugal, and the United Kingdom – recognized the State of Palestine. As of September 25, 157 countries have extended such recognition, including four of the five permanent members of the Security Council. These recognitions provide moral momentum for Palestinian statehood. Under certain conditions, however, this wave of diplomatic support could expose the West Bank, which has hitherto been spared Gaza-style violence, to a highly destructive Israeli offensive, including ethnic cleansing. Were portions of the West Bank to be wrested from Israeli control without serious international protection, they could become zones of devastation, rather than Palestinian safety. This risk stems from an institutional logic I identified in my comparison of state violence by Serbia and Israel, published over twenty years ago. When Serbian and Israeli control over adjacent territory was internationally contested and militarily incomplete, those areas were transformed into lawless “frontiers” where state violence was almost entirely unrestrained.

Imagine a scenario in which the UN Security Council orders Israel to withdraw from all or part of the West Bank and grants legal sovereignty to the Palestinian Authority or to a group of international trustees. Imagine, moreover, that the Security Council also refuses, or is incapable of, sending a robust peacekeeping force to protect those newly independent areas. Under such conditions, an Israeli government influenced by the country’s radical right wing, as it is today, might regard this move as a unique opportunity to empty the West Bank of its Palestinian population. To see how this might happen, consider the wars of Yugoslav succession in the 1990s. In 1992, Bosnia was legally detached from “rump Yugoslavia” (Serbia and Montenegro) through international acts of recognition that provided no military force to secure its borders. European countries were keen to protect Bosnia from the Serbian-backed violence that had wracked Croatia the previous year, and believed they were doing just that by recognizing Bosnian independence. They did nothing to physically protect the new Bosnian state, however, and counted instead on diplomacy and international law to do the heavy lifting. International recognition of Bosnian sovereignty incentivized ethnic Serb paramilitaries, backed by agencies of the Serbian state, to swarm over the newly created border and conduct acts of awful destruction, including ethnic cleansing.

Interestingly, those very same paramilitaries harassed — but did not forcibly displace — Muslims in the Sandzak, an area located firmly within Serbia and Montenegro. The Sandzak was populated by Muslims with family ties to Bosnia. Serbian nationalists feared and detested Sandzak’s Muslim inhabitants, but did not dare to attack them in force. The difference in Serbian paramilitary violence stemmed from the fact that the Yugoslav federation, whose main component was Serbia, regarded the Sandzak as an internationally recognized component of its own territory, where the rule of law was still obtained. The newly sovereign Bosnia-Herzegovina, by contrast, had been abruptly constituted as a distinct and foreign territory beyond rump Yugoslavia’s zone of lawful control.

Two striking cases illustrated these differences. In the first, ethnic Serb paramilitaries based in the Sandzak crossed into Bosnia to kidnap and kill Muslim citizens of Serbia, but only when the train they were traveling on dipped momentarily into Bosnian territory. The paramilitaries felt empowered to attack Serbian Muslims *only when they were located, for a brief instant, outside the Yugoslav zone of law and order*. In the second case, paramilitaries based in the Montenegrin town of Pljevlja, located only 15 miles from the Bosnian border, had a violent temper tantrum, seized control of the town from local police, and threatened to wreak havoc on Muslim residents. Yugoslav federal

Opinion – International Recognition of Palestine and the Risk of a West Bank “Frontier”

Written by James Ron

authorities, under the influence of the Serbian government, quickly mobilized, swooped into Pljevlja and crushed the rebellion. Those paramilitaries were receiving Belgrade’s backing to fight in Bosnia, but were prevented by Belgrade from doing the same inside Montenegro. Muslims living in Pljevlja were terrified, but were ultimately spared Bosnia-like violence. Today, the Sandzak Muslim community is still alive and in their homes.

We can also distinguish clear and different geographies of violence in the Israeli arena. From 1967 to 2005, for example, Israel was the internationally recognized ruling authority in both the West Bank and Gaza. It was the military occupier, and its violence in those areas was comparatively restrained, despite extremist support for destroying and expelling the Palestinian population. Israel had seized those areas from Jordan and Egypt in the 1967 war, and from an international legal perspective, was both the *de facto* and *de jure* occupying force. Israel said those areas were militarily “administered” rather than “occupied,” but regarded the area as one of law and order. It did not allow Jewish settler-militias to do entirely as they wished.

Consider also the case of Lebanon. During the 1982 war and then from 1985 to 2000, Israeli forces treated Lebanon, including Israel’s self-declared Security Zone, as a comparatively lawless frontier over which it never accepted legal responsibility. As a young Israeli paratrooper in the late 1980s, I witnessed military behavior towards Lebanese civilians in the Security Zone that officers would never have permitted in the West Bank. Israeli soldiers served in both locales, but we clearly understood that the rules in each arena were very different. These differences were hard-wired into the military’s legal system, which investigated suspected abuses by its own forces in the West Bank and Gaza far more seriously and consistently than in Lebanon.

Today, Israel employs a similarly bifurcated strategy. After the deadly Hamas attack in October 2023, the government unleashed dramatic, frontier-style violence against Palestinians in Gaza. It felt free to do so because Israel had withdrawn from the enclave in 2005, relinquishing legal authority and more responsibility (in its own mind) over the area. In the process, it reconfigured Gaza into a Lebanon- or Bosnia-style frontier. Much of the international legal community has continued to regard Gaza as Israeli-occupied territory, arguing that its military controls access and egress, as well as the Strip’s coast and airspace. Israel, however, has long insisted it is no longer legally or effectively in charge, setting a psychological and bureaucratic process in motion that has externalized the Strip from Israel’s zone of moral and legal responsibility. As a result, Israel has felt free over the years to launch operations in Gaza that resembled those of Serbian forces in Bosnia, or its own actions in Lebanon. Today, its extreme disinterest in the safety and well-being of Palestinian civilians caught up in the fighting with Hamas is reminiscent of those experiences. Gaza has become a full-blown frontier, with awful consequences.

Geography and formal legal responsibility matter. The West Bank, bound ever more tightly to Israel through proliferating settlements and escalating legal control, is not being subjected to Gaza-style violence, despite military challenges from Palestinians in Jenin and elsewhere. Although Israeli troops and settlers certainly do attack West Bank Palestinians, they do so with some basic restraint, at least when compared to Gaza. This means that as the current government increasingly integrates much of the West Bank into the Israeli bureaucratic and legal system, it may find itself *less* able to resort to the exclusionary violence that its radical coalition partners desire. Paradoxically, this suggests the Palestinian drive for independence entails an under-explored risk. If the West Bank were to truly break free of Israel, as many Palestinians and their international allies hope, Israel might well treat this newly externalized territory as a frontier, with Gaza-like ramifications.

B’Tselem, the Israeli rights group, recently warned that Jewish radicals, including those with a foothold in the current Israeli government, hope to extend Gaza-style operations to the West Bank. Recognition of Palestine without a serious international military commitment to its security could provide just the opportunity these radicals require to carry out their plans. Frontiers inhabited by ethnic outgroups and perched on the edge of militarily powerful and exclusionary states are at risk of extreme violence. Subordination and legal incorporation into an ethnocracy such as Israel are humiliating, deeply painful, and discriminatory, but may also offer a modicum of physical protection.

This is not an argument for continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank. Instead, it is a cautionary note to international actors who are generous with their diplomatic overtures but stingy with serious, on-the-ground security forces. In the absence of a robust international military force to protect any part of the West Bank wrested from Israeli

Opinion – International Recognition of Palestine and the Risk of a West Bank “Frontier”

Written by James Ron

control, well-meaning international actors may unexpectedly provoke ethnic cleansing, rather than greater safety for the Palestinian people.

About the author:

James Ron is a sociologist, political scientist, and former academic who is now an independent writer. He held tenure-track and tenured positions at Johns Hopkins, McGill University (where he was a Canada Research Chair), the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (at Carleton University in Ottawa), CIDE (in Mexico City), and the University of Minnesota (where he held an endowed chair). His work and research interests can be found at www.jamesron.com, Google Scholar, or ResearchGate.