Does European Recognition of a Palestinian State Mean Anything?

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With the Swedish government having just recognized the State of Palestine, and the UK parliament having recently passed a non-binding resolution to a similar effect, IR scholars need to ask at least two questions. What is the significance of such recognition when the state in question – defined by things like territorial sovereignty and monopoly over the use of force in that territory and over its population – doesn't actually exist? And in a protracted conflict scenario such as that between Israel and the Palestinians, do such "unilateral" third-party actions help or hurt the chance for a permanent peace settlement? In this short article, I will show how these moves, while short on material significance, are long on symbolic richness. Yet, while we know that in international politics symbols matter, the crux of this issue relates to the stronger party's (in this case, Israel's) own perception of the justness of its own mission.

First, some background. While the establishment of a Palestinian state in all or most of the West Bank and in Gaza has been part of the implied international consensus since the Oslo period of the early 1990s, concrete changes to that effect have been slow in coming. The Oslo agreement left the most important issues – settlements, borders, refugees, and Jerusalem – as "final status issues" that have still, two decades later, not been resolved. Still, Israel has begun to withdraw from some of these areas. In 2005, Israel removed all its ground forces and all 8,000 or so settlers from the Gaza Strip, but retains control over the population registry, maintains a naval and air blockade over the area, and, along with Egypt, controls the land crossings in and out of the strip.

In the West Bank, Israeli settlement has steadily increased, now numbering around 300,000 settlers (plus 200,000 in East Jerusalem). However, some transfer of authority has taken place. Israel has withdrawn from a portion of the West Bank, called Area A, where the vast majority of Palestinians live. In Area B, Israel and the Palestinian Authority share control. Israel retains full control over Area C, representing some 60 percent of the land area, and including around 300,000 Palestinian residents. Nevertheless, through its military, Israel retains the ability, self-declared authority, and sometimes the will to enter any area of the West Bank.

So what does it mean for European countries, in this case, to "recognize" Palestine? Not much, in actual terms. As Seth Mandel argued in the conservative-leaning *Commentary* magazine, the humorous barbs traded between Israel's foreign minister and Sweden's foreign minister illustrate the nub of the problem between how Israel understands its quandary and how much of the rest of the world sees it. While Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman joked that making peace is more complicated than Ikea furniture, the Swedish foreign minister Margot Wallström retorted that she would be happy to send Lieberman a flat-pack of furniture from Ikea. The only problem is, she added, assembling Ikea products requires a partner, cooperation, and a good manual.

Mandel rightly points out that Wallström's retort unwittingly echoes the Israeli perspective. Israel has long claimed that it lacks such a partner in the Palestinians. Conservative commentators are prone to agree, while more critical and liberal ones tend to see this "no partner" mantra as a sorry excuse for clinging to the status quo while continuing to colonize the West Bank.

While complaining that they have "no partner," Israelis have also elevated the idea of "unilateral moves" to the status

of taboo, the idea being that only through negotiations should a Palestinian state be permitted to come about. When Abbas went to the UN in a 2012 bid for recognition, Israel's ambassador Ron Prosor declared that "as long as President Abbas prefers symbolism over reality, as long as he prefers to travel to New York for U.N. resolutions, rather than travel to Jerusalem for genuine dialogue, any hope of peace will be out of reach."

Critics of Israeli policy can point to Israel's own tendency to unilateralism when it suits the government: the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza while maintaining border and population control, the 2003 erection of the barrier within the West Bank, announcements of settlements in particularly sensitive neighbourhoods around East Jerusalem (and the West Bank in general), and so on.

In some ways, there is a confusing conflation between Israel's claim that unilateral moves should be off-limits, and the reality that a Palestinian state will, in reality, only come about through negotiations. So, while in the minds of the Palestinians, Israel is morally wrong to oppose these moves of recognition, they are mistaken if they think these moments of recognition represent actual change. Israel's military remains where it is. The separation barrier remains intact. Checkpoints still exist. Settlements are only expanding.

However, there is one aspect of these Palestinian bids for recognition, and European and UN conferrals of same, in which there is a potential effect. That is in the area of symbols. In international politics, symbols are important markers of identity (Kaufman, 2001). They are also important signifiers of international norms, as constructivists in IR have shown. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, international opinion has begun to focus on the Israeli occupation of the West Bank (and partly of Gaza) as morally, legally, and politically problematic. Insofar as these incidents of recognition signal such displeasure, and insofar as this displeasure is backed by diplomatic and popular action (i.e., the global boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement), this is something with which Israel must contend.

However, ever since Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion dismissed the relevance of the UN with the unforgettable phrase "Oom-shmoom" ("UN-Shmu-en"), Israel has guarded its independence jealously. And with the exception of some tense moments surrounding "loan guarantees" in the early 1990s, the now 3 billion dollars in annual American aid has never appeared to be seriously at risk. Israel remains much stronger, militarily and economically, than its fledgling Palestinian national partner.

So as long as Israel actually believes it has "no partner" in the Palestinians, these acts of recognition may serve as a moral signal to the world, buttressing the identity of the signaller (in this case, Sweden), and strengthening the global norm against prolonged military occupation, but will have little practical effect on Israeli foreign policy and thus on the creation of a Palestinian state. For its part, despite some ominous warnings by Israeli officials, the boycott and divestment movement has thus far produced little in the way of material damage to Israel, though effects might be worse among West Bank industries. In those cases, Israeli companies might seek to relocate back across the Green Line, as Soda Stream just announced, while leaving the overall occupation intact.

What will ultimately sway Israelis, and in turn their government, is the belief that Israel is acting in a way contrary to its own identity, namely that it is oppressing Palestinians in a way that is disproportionate to its own perceived security requirements. This is arguably the dynamic that emerged after Israel's more offensive operations in the 1980s, namely the "war of choice" that was the 1982 Israel-PLO War in Lebanon, and Israel's aggressive response to the first Intifada (1987-1993), whereby Israel changed its policy to the Palestinians, recognizing the PLO and agreeing to negotiate (Sucharov, 2005).

But since the faltering Oslo process produced more violence than peace dividends, Israelis simply don't see Palestinians as wholly undeserving of their fate. Suicide bombings following the Oslo negotiations, the second Intifada following the collapse of Camp David in 2000, and Hamas rockets fired from Gaza all paint a picture to Israelis of Palestinians who cannot be trusted to leave Israel in peace. And so while Israelis are currently nearly evenly divided among those who want to continue negotiations with the Palestinians (50% in recent polling) and those who do not (44%), we are not seeing a decisive internal reckoning with Israel's own path.

Those on the outside and on the inside who wish to see an end to the occupation and the rise of a Palestinian state in its place, therefore, would be wise to try to strengthen the forces of the internal debate within Israel – within the parliament and the shrinking peace movement, including attempting to connect with key identity markers among the settlers and others who might otherwise benefit from the continued status quo (Brent, Sasley & Sucharov, 2011).

References

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