

Recognising a Symbolic Palestinian State Will Only Help Israel's Far Right Block a Real One

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Instead of empty gestures, Western leaders could have pressed for a detailed postwar plan for securing Gaza, removing Hamas from power, reforming the PA, and laying real foundations for future statehood.

Good statecraft depends on marrying objectives and means. So are those now recognising a Palestinian state spelling out an objective that they have the means to act on—and is it even an appropriate objective at this point? The answer, regrettably, is no to both. No one who is presently calling for Palestinian statehood can do much to bring it about.

In theory, if Israel is believed to be the main impediment to Palestinian statehood, pressure on it could get it to modify its positions. But since October 7, 2023, Israelis across the political spectrum—left to right—see a Palestinian state as likely to be led by Hamas and as a mortal threat. As one senior Israeli official said to me, “If we have only our fingernails to fight with, we will prevent that.” Pressure from the outside is not going to change that sentiment; only when Israelis see a transformed reality among Palestinians where Hamas is clearly condemned and rejected, and the continuing narrative of resistance is replaced by one of co-existence, will it become possible to alter that perception.

As for whether a Palestinian state is an appropriate objective now, one can ask who would lead such a state. Today, Palestinians are divided in leadership—with most of the world supporting the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and not Hamas in Gaza—but the PA is profoundly unpopular among Palestinians. It lacks legitimacy and is rife with corruption. A Palestinian state any time soon—even if it were possible with Israel—would be a failed state. So why the move to recognise Palestinian statehood?

My explanation: frustration and anger over the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and the inability to affect the

behaviour of the Israeli government. To be fair, there is probably also the belief that there must be some hope about the future for Palestinians; there must be a political horizon that points the way to what might be. The countries taking the step to recognise Palestinian statehood want to show they are doing something—both because they genuinely feel something must be done and because they also feel domestic political pressure to show they are acting.

I understand the frustration and the anger and even the need to show there is a political horizon. But I also believe a better approach right now would be to focus on getting humanitarian assistance into Gaza and developing plans for what comes next there.

Why wasn't there a collective approach to insisting that the UN work with the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation instead of boycotting it? Why didn't those recognising a Palestinian state now address the issue of securing the delivery of assistance to those who need it? Moreover, why aren't these states making an effort to organise what could be a day-after approach to developing an interim or transitional administration for when the war ends?

The Arab plan that Egypt developed for post-war Gaza was half a plan—one that showed how reconstruction could take place without the evacuation of the Gazan population but offered nothing practical on demilitarisation of Gaza, which is essential for reconstruction. (Who, after all, is going to invest in Gaza if Hamas retains arms and can reconstitute itself and will trigger a war again?) Why not have the British, French, and Canadians work with the Arabs to come up with a plan for a transitional administration that would focus on security, law and order, prevention of smuggling, and functional working groups to manage rehabilitation, rubble and bomb removal, health, water, electricity, and a new educational system? (Such a plan should also include a specific programme for reform of the Palestinian Authority, with milestones for transparency on budgeting, investments, and economic governance—the necessary preconditions for it to assume responsibility in Gaza after a transition period of two-three years).

The surest and most credible way to put pressure on the Netanyahu government would have been to present the plan publicly and fully fleshed out for a post-war Gaza with an alternative leadership to Hamas—and the means to ensure it was no longer in control. More than 70 per cent of the Israeli public favours ending the war to get the release of all the hostages. But the war won't end in Gaza without an alternative to Hamas, and such a public plan, given the lack of one from the Netanyahu government, could have put much more effective pressure on it.

A serious step by step plan for the day after would have been a practical way not only to pressure Bibi but also to prepare tangibly for what comes next. It would have been a concrete step, not a symbolic one. Even assuming more countries are to recognise a Palestinian state and have it endorsed at the UN, what will change on the ground the day afterward? In a word, nothing; once again symbols will take the place of substance. The Palestinian national movement has always found it easier to embrace symbols over substance, with the Palestinian people paying the price.

The problem today is that the symbols give the far right in Israel, like Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, an excuse to press for more de facto Israeli annexation in the West Bank, and by his own admission, a reason to press for resettling Gaza to prevent Palestinian statehood. In other words, those deciding to recognise a Palestinian state are not only not advancing that goal, but are giving this Israeli government a reason to do more to prevent Palestinian statehood.

The right focus now should be on getting the war ended. Only this can provide real relief for Gazans, and this is the only way to save all of the remaining Israeli hostages who are still alive. It is not clear how much more time they have. Hamas has been defeated and is no longer a military—only a terrorist organisation. But the war cannot end without an alternative to Hamas in Gaza, and that is why a serious transitional administration, under a regional and international umbrella that will also assume responsibility for security and law and order, with PA participation and

a tangible approach to demilitarisation, are necessary. The formula of reconstruction for demilitarisation must be a guiding principle if there is to be reconstruction—which is itself a massive undertaking now.

Those who are recognising the state of Palestine now—with few if any conditions on the kind of state it would be—should move beyond rhetoric and work now to shape what comes next in Gaza. That could be the first step in a process. Making sure the PA implements credible reforms and doesn't just pay lip service to them can build on that process and, in coordination with the Trump Administration, provide a stronger basis to insist that Israel make life easier for the PA, not harder.

In addition, if President Trump is to have any hope for producing normalisation between Saudi Arabia and Israel, something that is now more distant than it was before, he must stop the Smotrich moves that are dramatically expanding settlements and changing the landscape of the West Bank. That and the lawlessness of extremist Israeli settlers and hilltop youth—who get a pass from National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir—must also stop. Even if a Palestinian state may not be possible any time soon, President Trump will have to ensure that this Israeli government does not take steps that make it impossible forever.

Dennis Ross is the Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and a former senior official in the Reagan, Bush, Clinton, and Obama administrations. This article was originally published [on the Jewish Chronicle website \(https://www.thejc.com/opinion/recognising-a-symbolic-palestinian-state-will-only-help-israels-far-right-block-a-real-one-f3iu6f90\)](https://www.thejc.com/opinion/recognising-a-symbolic-palestinian-state-will-only-help-israels-far-right-block-a-real-one-f3iu6f90). ❖

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