



Sweden and the Peace Process – A Strained Relationship

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Brief Analysis

On October 30, the newly installed Swedish government recognized the state of Palestine, becoming the first major country within the European Union to do so. This makes Sweden the third EU-country to take such a step, following Iceland in 2011 and the Vatican, which signed a diplomatic treaty with Palestine in June 2015 effectively bestowing recognition (Cyprus and Malta recognized Palestine in 1988 before they became EU-members).

Israel protested the recognition and, for a while, withdrew its ambassador from Stockholm. The argument from Jerusalem was that Sweden, together with the EU as a whole, had long supported the notion that no foreign policy move should be inserted into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that could jeopardize negotiations between the parties. From the Israeli perspective, Sweden's actions and particularly timing bolstered the Palestinian factions with little interest or intention to negotiate with Israel. Moreover, recognition of the Abbas government removed incentives to continue negotiations, since they could let the EU, UN, or other international actors pressure Israel into concessions without having to offer anything in return.

For its part, the Swedish government argued that by recognizing Palestine, Sweden was allowing equal negotiations to move forward between two states instead of the current imbalance of one state negotiating with a government lacking full recognition of statehood.

As with any major foreign policy decision, domestic politics have affected change in a region with radically different perspectives and challenges. Ideologically, the Swedish government (a coalition government made up of the Social-Democratic and the Green Parties) is ideologically nearly as far away from the Netanyahu administration as is possible and perhaps not much closer to the Abbas administration. But Sweden's relationships with both governments have shifted primarily due to a new ideological infusion into the Swedish political system. The present Swedish administration is dominated by the ideologically activist left (and far-left) components of the Social-Democratic party, and the same can be said for the Green party, which is even more ideologically 'pure' than the

Social-Democrats. Though ideology in party politics is nothing new in Sweden, the ideas of identity-politics and an emphasis on ideology, as opposed to pragmatism, have recently come to dominate these parties. Both present a view of the world that clearly and sharply delineates between 'right' and 'wrong.' That the Swedish government would in particular find Israeli politics reprehensible also lies in the history of these parties. The individuals now in charge cut their political teeth during the 1970s and 1980s, when Israel shifted from a weak, threatened socialist country to a neighborhood 'bully' occupying the country of Palestine and instigating most of the region's conflicts.

The present Swedish Foreign Minister—Margot Wallström—is an excellent example of this class of political ideologues. In recent statements, Wallström tied the November 13 Paris attacks to Palestinian frustration with the situation in the Middle East, arguing, “To counteract the radicalization we must go back to the situation such as the one in the Middle East of which not the least the Palestinians see that there is no future: we must either accept a desperate situation or resort to violence.” She followed this explanation with an accusation against Israel for using “extrajudicial killings” and a “disproportionate” response to the string of knife- and vehicular attacks in Israel for the past months, further linking the two types of violence.

Premier Stefan Löfven's statement on December 7 continued on the theme of the recent knife attacks, claiming that the attacks did not constitute terrorism. Later, Löfven attempted to walk back his statement, deploring in a joint press-release with Wallström that his comments had been “misunderstood” and that; “The situation in the Middle East is difficult enough without having to be encumbered by misunderstandings about anybody's intentions.”

Wallström's and Löfven's attitudes reveal how Sweden has embarked on a road that in just the past year has soured diplomatic relations with countries across the Middle East—not just Israel—and Sweden's Nordic neighbors alike. This 'moral majority' ideology has placed principles ahead of pragmatic relations with other countries. These principles are based not on the universal ones enshrined, for example, in such august bodies as the UN declaration of Human Rights, but on a very narrow reading of the world that often completely ignores that other countries often fail to share the present Swedish government's take on world affairs.

This is particularly obvious in the present government's treatment of the plethora of Middle East challenges facing the international community. For individuals like Margot Wallström, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict looms large and 'explains' both international terrorism and other present conflicts in the MENA region. Moreover, sides are squarely divided along a clear axis of good and evil. The evil must be solidly blamed for their misdeeds, while the good may commit mistakes but must not be faulted for them. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Wallström and others consider the Palestinians as weak, and therefore the 'good', half of the dichotomy. Subsequent violence and atrocities are therefore excused without exception or nuance, justified by the belief that without Israeli occupation, the violence would cease. This simplistic view presents very little consideration of other factors.

Needless to say, Sweden's recent shift in policy has placed it at odds with some of its colleagues in the European Union on several issues relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By becoming the first major EU-country to change the hitherto adhered-to policy of avoiding any action that might preclude an agreement between the Israeli and Palestinian governmental bodies, Sweden has presented an alternate dispersion of power and issues on the negotiations table. In Sweden's new image, Palestinian statehood as a fact should help negotiations, rather than come about as a result of them.

Sweden's government has explicitly stated that the purpose of the recognition was to help build a future where both Israel and Palestine could live “in peaceful coexistence with secure and recognized borders.” Yet the government's recent policies may affect developments in the UNRWA, demographic shifts in Sweden itself, and the achievability of a two state solution.

In the second part of this article, Norell discusses the effects that this ideological shift in Swedish policy may have on

various aspects of the peace process. ❖



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