

Spain's recognition of state of Palestine can make the difference



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OPINION

The 'October 7 War' is a strategic turning point for the Israeli-Palestinian bilateral relations, as well as for Israel's regional and global alliances. The concept marketed by the Israeli cabinet that Hamas was contained and deterred, and that Israel could be integrated into the Middle East region without addressing the Palestinian issue — an idea that had been conveniently adopted by Western leaders — collapsed on that very day. In the midst of so much bloodshed and an enormous magnitude of destruction, talk of the need for a two-state solution has taken centre stage again. It is to be hoped that the international conversation on the 'day after' will dictate a strategic exit to this war that will bring about an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement based on the two-states paradigm. A Spanish recognition of the State of Palestine at this stage can ignite the momentum that might lead to overall European and UN recognition.

Israeli occupation: a personal note

It is not easy at all for me, who served in Israel's diplomatic service for over three decades, to stand out clearly for the instant recognition of Palestine in sharp contradiction with my cabinet's position. It needs some explanation.

I entered the Israeli diplomatic service four years after the 1967 Six-Day War, after fighting as a soldier and as an officer in Israel's armoured divisions. My personal focus was mostly on the Middle East.

From day one of my diplomatic career, I discovered a peace-oriented diplomatic service. Israel already controlled and administered the occupied territories, but the declared aim was to exchange those territories for peace. It was a quite frustrating period as no Arab country even considered recognising Israel. In November 1977 we encountered, for the first time, a dramatic Arab turning point. We hosted the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in Jerusalem, and gradually built our peace with Egypt. I was among the first diplomats officially visiting Cairo in what seemed like a dream come true. The mood in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a result of our agreement with Egypt was euphoric. Simultaneously, outside the government, the emerging pro-peace civil society included many of my student-years personal friends. They named their movement 'Peace Now'. In the early 1980s I was sent as a young diplomat to Ankara, Turkey, the only other Muslim country with which we had diplomatic relations at the time. The aim was to strengthen and further expand our diplomatic representation in the Middle East. Unfortunately, that did not happen during the whole decade. A wave of Israeli-Palestinian violence during 1987-89 slowed down the regional peace efforts.

During my years in Ankara, religious-nationalistic elements inside Israel were forcing the cabinet to allow the establishment of civilian settlements in the West Bank and Gaza.

They were highly motivated and well organised. It looked to me, watching the process from a distance, as a historic mistake. However, the Israeli leadership managed to convince us, young diplomats, that those settlements were needed for security reasons, that they were only temporary and would serve as a bargaining chip in due time. The declared plan was to evacuate the settlements when the Israeli-Palestinian peace process would be mature. 'Land for peace' was the diplomatic slogan that we proudly marketed all over the globe. I whole-heartedly believed in it. 'Two states for two peoples' was the declared official policy.

Nothing of this really happened in years to come. Even when we signed the Oslo Declaration of Principles with the Palestinians in September 1993, the settlements were not removed. Instead, they grew in size and population, gradually making a just and lasting agreement with the Palestinians more difficult. In November 1995, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated during his effort to enhance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. As a result, the well-intentioned Oslo Process entered a five-year period of deep freeze. In May 1999 Ehud Barak (heading the Labour Party) won the general election. Shortly after, he asked me to serve as the Foreign Ministry's Director General.

I saw this as a golden opportunity. I knew Barak personally and saw him as the politician that might U-turn the religious-nationalistic tendencies and lead the public into a just and lasting peace agreement with Yasser Arafat. I was convinced about Barak's sincere intentions. However, the negotiations that took place under US President Bill Clinton's auspices at Camp David in 2000 ultimately failed. As a result, a big wave of devastating violence broke out again (2000-03) and shattered the hopes for peace.

Israel rushed back into a strengthened religious-nationalistic momentum, further expanding the settlements during the following two decades, creating a reality that started to look irreversible. In the early autumn of 2023, already out of Israel's diplomatic service, I found myself in a very strange mood. I stopped believing that a Palestinian State was a viable possibility (in fact, the two-states goal had already disappeared from the official Israeli agenda a long time before), while simultaneously I was 100% sure that Israel's control over five million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (still under siege) was unsustainable. It looked like a tragic and explosive situation. The West Bank settlements kept expanding while the international community practically accepted them, including key countries in the Muslim world. As a professional diplomat, I had to admit on 6 October 2023, one day before the surprise attack on Israel, that Israel's international standing had never been better. All the above has been changing dramatically since 6:30 am on Saturday October 7, when the sirens woke all of us, and rushed us into our home shelters. That morning alarms and their aftermath had already changed our personal lives, as well as Israel's overall situation.

The Israeli-Palestinian global picture

The 'October 7 War' (its temporary name) already constitutes a strategic turning point for Israeli-Palestinian

bilateral relations, as well as for Israel's regional and global alliances. The attack that Hamas launched that day turned out to be the most devastating military chapter in the history of modern-day Israel. It left Israeli society shattered and bewildered and ignited an urge for revenge among many Israelis. Simultaneously, the international community, particularly the US and the West, came to a meaningful awakening. The concept marketed by the Israeli cabinet that Hamas was contained and deterred, and that Israel could be integrated into the Middle East region without addressing the Palestinian issue — an idea that had been conveniently adopted by Western leaders — collapsed on that very day.

The events of October 7 and those that followed exposed how irresponsible it was for the international community to neglect one of the most dangerous and volatile conflict areas on earth. Over the past six months we have seen the principal global players, with the US at the helm, spring into action to contain the fighting and prevent it from spiralling out of control regionally and globally. At the same time, talk of the need for a two-state solution has taken centre stage again. It is to be hoped that the international conversation on the 'day after' will dictate a strategic exit to this war that will bring about an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement based on the two-states paradigm. It is a pity that so much bloodshed and an enormous

magnitude of destruction were needed to bring the international community back to its senses with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Unfortunately, to date there have been no indications from either of the fighting sides that they are prepared to adopt the course of diplomacy to resolve the conflict. On the contrary, the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, appears to be concerned with protecting his political domain, while Hamas's leader, Yahya Sinwar, remains insistent on retaining Hamas's control over the civil and military governance of the Gaza Strip. The Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, continues to rule out Palestinian statehood and has declared that Israel will maintain 'security control' over Gaza in the aftermath of the war. He convinced the Knesset (Israel's parliament) to pass, by a great majority, a decision that rejects any external attempt to impose a Palestinian state on Israel. Furthermore, the political discourse in Israel is inundated with talk of transferring the Palestinian population from the Gaza Strip and re-establishing Jewish settlements in that territory.

This dim picture must not deter the international community from action. On the contrary, it is further evidence of the conclusion drawn by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the EU, Josep Borrell, that 'the solution has to be imposed from the outside'.

When the fighting ends—soon, it is to be hoped — the suffering and devastation in Gaza, where some two-thirds of the population have become internally displaced and where the danger from Israeli bombardment is coupled with rising cases of disease and the threat of famine, will require both immediate and massive humanitarian attention and long-term planning. Gaza reconstruction, however, can no longer be separate from a political strategy designed to resolve



Protestors wave Palestinian flags and light flares in Madrid, Spain, on January 27, 2024, as they demonstrate in support of Gazans.

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