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The Statehood Trap

Noura Erakat and Shahd Hammouri

A growing number of states, including the UK, France, and Canada, are moving to recognize Palestinian statehood. While this move has the potential to be strategically harnessed to advance Palestinian rights, it equally bears the risk of normalizing the genocide of the Palestinian people in Gaza while stabilizing the status quo of Israel's colonial rule and stunting the potential of genuine self-determination.

The greatest promise of this renewed statehood bid, the most recent push being in 2011-12, is a united front to challenge U.S. intransigent support for Israel. Since becoming Israel's primary ally following the 1967 War, the United States has leveraged its role as a global superpower to systematically shield Israel from accountability and undermine multilateral efforts to advance Palestinian self-determination. Most recently, U.S. support for Israel has featured the unimpeded flow of weapons, the imposition of sanctions on the International Criminal Court for issuing arrest warrants for Israeli leaders, and, most notably, issuing five security council vetoes against a ceasefire. The statehood bid is the first coordinated effort by European states to confront U.S. policy and that momentum is much needed. But their push for Palestinian statehood is not only inadequate, but it also sidesteps non-derogable rights belonging to the Palestinian people.

Introduced 22 months into the genocide that third-party states have refused to prevent or end, the statehood bid now stands to reward Israel by saving it from itself. Considering its growing isolation on the global stage, including criticism from its traditional allies, the diplomatic effort risks stemming a critical reckoning with Zionism, a supremacist ideology that necessitates the elimination of Palestinians to establish and maintain Jewish settler sovereignty in Palestine. It is Zionist ideology that has animated the Nakba, a structure of dispossession, removal, and elimination across all of Palestine, most formatively in 1948, and most grotesquely today in Gaza. Recognizing a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, without attention to the full scope of Palestinian self-determination, would normalize the Nakba and keep intact the very logic that has facilitated nearly two years of colonial genocide featuring unprecedented cruelty. It would reframe the genocide as an eruption in hostilities between interminable adversaries and effectively relegate some 11 million refugees to permanent exile while subjecting some 2 million Palestinian citizens of the state, whom 56 percent of Jewish-Israelis support forcibly deporting, to permanent subjugation.

A similar phenomenon took place following the 1993 Oslo Accords. In exchange for signing the Peace Accords, which provided Israel the veneer of being a “partner in peace” without any meaningful measures of accountability or oversight, Israel normalized its economic relations globally. Since then, it has only accelerated its settler colonial expansion as epitomized by the Knesset’s recent vote to annex the West Bank, without consequence. Recognition of a Palestinian state is not a substitute for sanctions and accountability, but that is precisely a serious risk it also poses because states are likely to recognize Palestine at the expense of fulfilling their existing legal obligations and duties.

State obligations towards Palestine under international law are crystal clear. In January 2024, the International Court of Justice ruled there is a plausible genocide obligating states to prevent genocide, and in July 2024, the UN’s primary judicial organ determined the presence of Israel in Gaza and the West Bank unlawful thus mandating international boycott. In late 2016, the Security Council passed Resolution 2334 unequivocally condemning Israel’s settlement enterprise in the West Bank. And this is to say nothing of the myriad General Assembly Resolutions, or the reports by specialized human rights agencies all castigating Israel’s systematic abuses of Palestinians. Third-party states must impose unwavering sanctions to ensure that genocide and occupation are rendered unprofitable. This requires international cooperation to exclude Israel from both the global market and international organizations.

States do not need to recognize Palestine to end the occupation, to end the genocide, and advance Palestinian self-determination — they need decisive will to impose arms and energy embargos, end

trade with, and investment in, Israel, unseat it from the UN, hold Israel war criminals and complicit corporations accountable in their national courts, and arrest Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in compliance with the ICC's arrest warrant. To date, the world's most economically advanced states have demurred on those obligations to sign a declaration of statehood, sanction a few settlers, and support paltry humanitarian aid. And now, their statehood bid may further obviate those duties and obligations.

Britain most vividly exemplifies this possibility. British Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, has threatened to recognize Palestine as a state unless Israel ends its genocide, and commit to "a long-term sustainable peace reviving the prospect of a two-state solution." Threatening recognition to compel a ceasefire is absurd as it transforms two legal obligations, the duty to prevent genocide as well as the duty to stem Israel's unlawful occupation in Gaza and the West Bank, into political matters to be leveraged and negotiated. The price of recognition? A few thousand more dead and maimed, two million further starved, and a sadistic month-long extension of this grotesque iteration of Hunger Games — all to satisfy the whims of an empire that has never confronted its crimes.

Even if made real, European recognition of Palestine has often been symbolic and inconsistent — some states recognized Palestine during the Cold War but later revoked or undermined it (e.g., Czech Republic, Hungary), demonstrating how recognition without sanctions or coherent policy is hollow. Meanwhile, recent recognition by Ireland reveals the risk of political opportunism. Ireland used its recognition of Palestine to delay effectuating a settlement trade ban as well as prohibiting the transit of weapons or divesting from Israeli bonds.

Another significant risk is the intention to empower the Palestinian Authority (PA) to assume leadership of the new state. The PA, an elitist and corrupt body that is complicit in crimes of the Israeli illegal occupation –including torture and lethal force against Palestinians deemed a threat to Israel. In nearly two years of genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, the PA has blocked all efforts to pursue sanctions on Israel, instead seeing the moment as an opportunity to permanently assume uncontested leadership over the OPT, and secure foreign aid. Indeed, this authority is a copy-paste of prior post-colonial governmental decoys, implanted to sustain a vague representation of autonomy. Their presence is designed to stifle the colonized population's ability to leverage international relations as a site of struggle. For Palestinians to develop an accountable leadership, they need assurance that their most adept leaders will not be imprisoned, deported, or assassinated. The current proposal for Palestinian self-governance is a police state subservient to U.S. and Israeli interests.

The terms of the High-Level International Conference for the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine convened in New York, led last week by France and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, confirm and exacerbate these risks. The seeming desire to appease the United States has not only led the parties to eschew the severe imbalance of power between a genocidal state and the people it seeks to destroy, but it is deliberately ahistorical.

The document could just as easily have been drafted in 2005, the nominal end of the farcical Oslo Peace Process. It conveniently omits the pillars of Palestinian self-determination and the fundamentals of third-state responsibility. Reparations are reduced to humanitarian aid, the right of return as well as accountability measures are dismissed, and negotiations are painted as the only path forward. More, the release of Israeli hostages is treated as an obligation while the release of Palestinian political prisoners is treated as a negotiable agenda item. Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority is glorified in at least seven clauses, entrusted with governing the state — effectively paving the way for a police state alongside a settler-colonial entity.

There is no mention of the siege and systematic war on Gaza, the expanded settlement enterprise in the West Bank, or U.S.-backed claims of Israeli sovereignty over East Jerusalem and the Syrian Golan Heights. The parties refuse to comment on Israel's 2018 Nation-State Law declaring that Jews have exclusive sovereignty over the land from the river to the sea, which consecrated its rule as apartheid according to legacy human rights organizations. The document's tone echoed the colonial-era civilizing rhetoric used to police subjugated nations demanding independence — even including paternalistic clauses about Palestinian school curricula.

As of August 2025, 149 countries already recognize the state of Palestine and since November 2012, Palestine has been a "non-member observer state" at the United Nations. Such recognition has done little to alleviate the Palestinian condition of Nakba or prevent its cruelest phase in Gaza today.

Recognition of Palestine is not the missing bridge between the genocidal present and a sustainable future. What remains missing is the political will to confront the colonization of Palestine and the economic and political imbrications with that enterprise. The US, Europe, and Gulf states, among others, have actively enabled Israel's war effort. For instance, the Arab League, Egypt, Jordan and Qata have refused to engage with other mechanisms such as the Hague Group, which seeks to impose sanctions on Israel, but have prioritized recognition indicating the initiative's shallow nature. Meanwhile, European nations have clung to arms and energy exports to Israel, fiercely resisting any objections even as many of them have harshly persecuted advocates demanding the just application of basic international law going so far as to smear them as "terrorists."

There is enough law to end genocide, to end the occupation, and to dismantle Israel's racial and colonial regime. Despite the clarity of international legal obligations, economically powerful states have refrained from taking concrete action for nearly two years — even as the most horrific, live-streamed genocide of contemporary history unfolds before the world. They now seek to sidestep them all together by recognizing a Palestinian state without accounting for Israel's genocide, its racially supremacist regime, or their complicity in both international crimes of the highest order.

Prioritizing statehood over the fulfilment of the basic pillars of self-determination and international norms of state responsibility does not serve justice for the Palestinians struggle, instead, it distorts it. It falsely equates self-determination to statehood – a dangerous equation that plagued previous decolonial struggles. The spectacle we witnessed in New York last week is another chapter in a continued colonial venture to stifle genuine self-determination. While political momentum is more critical than ever, Palestinian statehood on these terms is inadequate and rife with detrimental risk. Palestinians deserve much more and much better.