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Foreign Policy and the Performance of Collective State Recognition Amidst Genocide

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the recent wave of recognition of Palestine by two distinct groups of states: Caribbean nations (Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago) and Western European countries (Ireland, Norway, and Spain). It makes theoretical and empirical contributions, highlighting the role of performance and presentation in state recognition politics. It emphasizes the creative aspect of recognition by examining how the manner of performing, narrating and presenting recognition to the world influences other states, encouraging them to adopt similar recognition policies. The analysis reveals a predominant focus on political, security and geopolitical considerations, underscoring the inherently political nature of state recognition. The article highlights the significance of the performance and presentation of recognition to the broader public, generating added value to induce other states to follow suit. The article emphasizes the crucial role of contextual factors in informing the decision-making process of recognizing new states. It identifies two interconnected aspects driving the justification for recognizing Palestine: the foreign policy ambitions of the recognizing states and the imperative of maintaining consistency in their diplomatic stances. Recognition remains a symbolic act whose power and effect are deeply contingent and uncertain in the absence of the recognized entity's facts of sovereignty.

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The current Israeli war of genocide against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip has reignited the political debate around the recognition of Palestine as a state. In just a few weeks between April–May 2024, four Caribbean (Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago) and three Western European (Ireland, Norway and Spain) states extended their bilateral recognition of Palestine as a state. Moreover, other EU member states, such as Malta and Slovenia, expressed their ‘readiness’ to do the same (Varadkar et al. 2024). Although scholarship on state recognition has been growing since the 1990s, our knowledge and understanding of this aspect of international relations remains underdeveloped and evolving. The structure of the international society has long embraced restrictive measures that impede the emergence of new states (Griffiths 2017). Therefore, both the creation and recognition

of states are relatively occasional events. This article contributes to the literature on the politics of state recognition and Middle East politics by examining the recent wave of recognition of Palestine by two groups: Caribbean and Western European states. It draws insights from multiple disciplines and areas of study, including international relations, Middle East politics, recognition politics and Palestine/Israel, to explain how states practice, use and perform recognition.

This article makes theoretical and empirical contributions to the literature. Theoretically, it highlights the role of performance and presentation in the politics of state recognition. In this regard, it stresses the creative aspect of recognition. It aims to understand how and why states choose a particular way to practice, perform, and present their recognition of other entities. I argue that the manner of performing, narrating, and presenting recognition to the world is used to influence the behaviour of different states and induce them to take similar recognition policies. Therefore, performance, narration, and presentation of recognition can be as significant as the act of recognition itself. Performance and narration of recognition open up the decision-making process and enable other states to see and connect with its different aspects. To this end, the article empirically examines political rationalities presented in the Irish, Norwegian and Spanish coordinated narratives that underpin the recognition of Palestine. It also examines the brief narratives presented by the four Caribbean states.

A closer inspection of these narratives reveals a heavyweight focus on politics, security, geopolitics, and context. Legal discussions occupied a marginal place. This underlines the political nature of state recognition and the importance of performing and presenting it to the wider public to yield political impact. As a contingent foreign policy practice in its finest form, historical context is of primary importance in informing the decision-making process of recognizing new states. This wave of recognition of Palestine is informed by an unfolding genocide, grave war crimes and crimes against humanity, human-made famine, unprecedented levels of destruction and displacement against 2.3 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, alongside staggering colonial violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem (ICJ 2024a, 2024b; ICC 2024; Albanese 2024; South Africa 2023; Segal 2023). With this bleak context and overwhelming human suffering, wider regional wars, conflicts and instability in the Middle East and beyond may erupt at any moment.

The justification for recognizing Palestine has two interconnected aspects. The first stems from the foreign policy ambitions of the recognizing states, seeking to raise their stature and diplomatic actorness internationally and in the Middle East and EU foreign policymaking. In particular, the recognition of Palestine has enabled Ireland, Norway and Spain to actively participate in and influence the agenda and debate around the future security and geopolitical architecture of the Middle East. This, in turn, empowers their influence on EU foreign policy, particularly towards the so-called EU 'southern neighbourhood' and the Union for the Mediterranean, an area of high priority for Spain (La Moncloa 2021). Foreign policy consistency, or rather inconsistency, and joining the international consensus are crucial factors informing the decision-making of Caribbean and European countries. By recognizing Palestine, these states aimed at resolving major contradictions in their foreign policy. They had

been supporting the two-state solution without recognizing the other half of this equation: the State of Palestine. Second, they have forcefully endorsed the legal principle of territorial integrity in Ukraine, while not applying the same norm to Palestine. From this perspective, the recognition of Palestine is presented as a mechanism to harmonize foreign policy, thus enhancing the credibility and moral stature of the recognizing state.

The article proceeds in four sections. It starts by laying out the relevant theoretical debate on state recognition in the post-WWII international order. In the following section, the discussion examines the local, regional, and international political context of this wave of recognition. The third section critically examines the central arguments used to justify and explain the collective or coordinate recognition of Palestine. The fourth one focuses on the performance of recognition, highlighting the significant role that delivery, presentation, and publicity play in recognition politics. Finally, the concluding remarks underline the contingent and uncertain impact of recognition, particularly in the context of the growing drift towards the far-right politics in Europe.

State Recognition in the post-World War II International Order

State recognition is a fundamental condition in the process of state creation and acceptance into the post-WWII international society of states. While states may de facto exist and practice sovereignty over a particular territory and population, the legitimacy and legal personality of such an entity will remain lacking in the eyes of other states and international institutions (Fabry 2010; Coggins 2014). Therefore, recognition has long been debated among international law scholars and jurists, particularly regarding the divide between the declarative and constitutive effects of external recognition. Some consider recognition merely a declarative statement that acknowledges the concrete reality of states' existence independent of external recognition (James 2000). Others, however, view recognition as an essential condition of statehood and sovereignty (Wight 1972; Coggins 2014; Griffiths 2017).

Generally, an entity must fulfil the three minimal criteria of the 1933 Montevideo Convention to qualify as a state: control of a defined territory, a permanent population and a government (Crawford, 2006). In the post-WWII era and with the advance of decolonization, these criteria were qualified by other international norms, such as the prohibition of territorial acquisition by force and the right to self-determination of colonized nations. These norms offer colonized or occupied nations a priori right to independence. Consequently, entities may be recognized as sovereign states even if they lack territorial control or an effective government due to occupation or colonialism by other states (Fabry 2010; Geldenhuys 2009). The State of Palestine falls into this category, as the Palestinian people have the right to self-determination and continue to be colonized by Israel (Badarin 2021b; Quigley 2005; UN 2012; UNGA 2024).

In the post-WWII international system, external recognition –specifically, the approval of an emergent state by the United Nations General Assembly and the five permanent members of the Security Council– is the only pathway for gaining legal

personality as a state and joining the ‘sovereignty club’ (Griffiths 2017; Fazal and Griffiths 2014). The decentralized nature of state recognition and the structure of the international order have rendered recognition a fundamental area of great power politics and rivalry (Coggins 2014). This dynamic has intensified in the current shifting international environment due to changes in power distribution in the emergent multipolar world order (Badarin 2023b; Newman and Visoka 2021).

While great power rivalry may be decisive in certain cases of state recognition, there is an international consensus surrounding the recognition of the Palestinian right to self determination and independence in the OPT. The obstacle blocking Palestinian statehood and its admission into the sovereignty club is the lack of authorization from the UN Security Council, which requires nine affirmative votes and no veto from any of the five permanent members. In 2011 and 2024, the US blocked such authorization by applying its veto power. Although France and the UK do not officially recognize Palestine, they did not block its application for statehood to the Security Council in April 2024. The UK abstained, while France voted in favour and has expressed its readiness to extend recognition (UNSC 2024; Le Monde 2024). This voting pattern suggests that the barrier to Palestine’s legal recognition and UN membership is primarily political, stemming from the US (and to a lesser extent, the UK) staunch support for Israel, which some attribute to the influence of the Israel lobby (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007; Pappé 2024) and/or the centrality of the Zionist entity to the US-led imperialist structure (Ajl 2024; Alqaisiya 2024; Capasso and Kadri 2023).

Paradoxically, while recognition politics often gravitates towards prevailing international consensus, this method may not be impactful in creating sovereignty in the post-WWII order. As a decentralized practice, recognition is open to creative approaches that can infuse this symbolic act with additional political impact. This article stresses the significance of the performance of recognition. While the literature on state recognition is expanding, there is a lack of attention to how and why states choose a particular form and way to present their recognition (see O’Brien and Goebel (1965) cited in Ker-Lindsay 2017, 2). The manner of performing and presenting recognition to the world can be as significant as the act of recognition itself, as will be shown in the following sections.

The Palestinian Pursuit of State Recognition

Since 2011, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has prioritized the recognition of Palestine as an independent state in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian appeal to international legitimacy aimed to end the US monopoly over the so-called peace talks between the PA and Israel and to secure their right to statehood (Erekat 2012). By 2009, the futility of the US-brokered negotiations had become manifestly evident to the PA’s leadership. Even the Obama Administration, supposedly a more sympathetic Administration to the Palestinians than its predecessors, could only endorse ‘a mutually agreed outcome’ to the negotiations that did not end Israel’s colonization of the West Bank (Doc.4899 2009). In other words, the two-state solution was effectively shelved. Subsequently, the PA launched a diplomatic

campaign, referred to as the ‘internationalization of the Palestinian cause’ (*tadwil al-qadiyya al-falastinia*), in pursuit of ‘international legitimacy’ through external recognition and full membership in the UN. The aim of this diplomatic campaign, as explained by its chief architect Saeb Erekat, was to ‘re-put the state of Palestine on June 1967 with East Jerusalem as its capital on the geographic map’ (2012, 4).

However, since 2011, the US veto power at the Security Council has blocked the Palestinian attempt to gain full membership in the UN (PA 2011). That same year, 16 states, mostly from South America, extended their recognition of Palestine. In 2012, the UN General Assembly granted Palestine the status of an observer non-member state, enabling it to participate in UN proceedings and join its agencies (UN 2012). Since then, the issue of recognition of the Palestinian state has steadily declined on the international stage, as evidenced by the small number (nine) of states recognizing Palestine between 2012 and 2023. This decline reflects the broader regression of international attention to the Palestinian cause over the last decade, the stagnation of Palestinian leadership and institutions, and the seemingly successful Israeli conflict management strategy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In the Middle East, Palestine became one among other staggering conflicts in the region, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab revolts and counter-revolts since 2011. As a result, regional and international attention has turned elsewhere.

Nonetheless, the Palestinian struggle and resistance continued, periodically shining the spotlight on the Palestinian cause and dispossession. In terms of recognition, 2014 was a significant moment in the Palestinian pursuit of recognition. During this year, several European parliaments, including those of France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the UK, passed non-binding resolutions urging their governments to recognize Palestine. In September 2014, Sweden broke from the Western non-recognition policy and extended its bilateral recognition of Palestine. This decision came on the heels of a failed PA-Israel direct negotiations brokered by US Secretary of State John Kerry in April 2014 and the Israeli assault on Gaza between July 8 and August 26, 2014. All pretence about the peace process was shattered under the weight of unrelenting Israeli settler-colonial expansion (settlement construction) and violence. In this context, the Swedish government justified its decision to recognize Palestine as a step towards reviving the peace process and the two-state solution, promoting moderate Palestinian leadership, offering hope to youth, encouraging other European countries to recognize Palestine, and finally joining the international consensus of more than 136 states that recognized Palestine then (Badarin 2020, 2021b).

With the arrival of the Trump Administration, the discourse shifted significantly towards legitimizing Israel’s annexation of large swaths of the West Bank and East Jerusalem (as well as the Occupied Syrian Golan) and to erase the Palestinian right to self-determination and sovereignty (The White House 2020, 2017). On the EU front, regression was evident. Although the European Parliament expressed its support for the recognition of Palestine ‘in principle’ and acknowledged its capability to conduct state responsibilities (European Parliament 2014; European Commission 2013), it began to downgrade Palestinian interests (Badarin 2023a). The EU further expanded its economic and political ties with Israel. It relaunched the EU-Israel Association

Council, despite Israel's grave violations of international law and human rights and practice of apartheid (Council of the EU 2022; Al-Haq 2022; HRW 2022). In 2021, the EU's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, justified the relegation of Palestinian rights by suggesting that the EU lacks the 'capacity' to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because it has 'no leverage' and 'limited influence' in the region (Borrell 2021).

The confluence of regional and international changes paved the way for geopolitical realignments in the Middle East, sparking further normalization of relations between Israel and some Arab regimes. In 2020, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan (in 2021) signed the so-called Abraham Accords, resulting in official normalization of their relations with Israel. Saudi Arabia was reportedly close to following suit (McKernan 2023). These realignments abandoned the land-for-peace geopolitical formula stipulated in the UN Security Council Resolution 242 and the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which conditioned normalization on Israel's withdrawal from the territories it occupied in 1967 and the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem (API 2002).

Furthermore, the Abraham Accords created new regional and international dynamics that facilitated significant geopolitical projects that deepened Israel's relations with Arab states to unprecedented levels without addressing the Palestinian rights and dispossession. For example, in June 2022, the EU, Israel and Egypt concluded a natural gas deal (European Commission 2022). The following year, in September 2023, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) was announced at the G20 New Delhi summit, which completely excluded the Palestinians (The White House 2023). The planned corridor included rail and shipping facilities connecting India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel with the European market. Turkey also took significant steps to restore its diplomatic relations with Israel and embarked on developing joint natural gas energy projects in the Eastern Mediterranean (Balci 2023). The question of Palestine was virtually excluded from these geopolitical and economic arrangements. This context emboldened Israel to officially erase Palestine and the Palestinians from the supposed emerging geopolitical map of the 'New Middle East,' which Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu presented at the United Nations in September 2023 (Aljazeera 2023). In brief, the Palestine/Israel question and the entire Middle East seemed well-managed and under control. For instance, just a few days before 7 October 2023, President Biden's national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, went so far as to surmise that 'the region is quieter than it has been for decades' (Sullivan 2023). However, external observers could not see beyond the semblance of quiet. Indeed, it has never been quiet for the colonized and dispossessed Palestinians and the oppressed peoples of the region more broadly.

On October 7, 2023, the Palestinians revolted, breaking through the fences and walls that have besieged the Gaza Strip for nearly two decades. On that day, Hamas and other Palestinian groups launched a military operation, referred to as the al-Aqsa Flood, against Israeli targets. Israel responded by waging a war of genocide, which, at the time of writing, resulted in killing and injuring over 150 thousand Palestinians, displacing 1.9 million people, destroying most of the infrastructure and residential

buildings and inflicting human-made famine in the Gaza Strip (South Africa 2023; Albanese 2024). Against this background, the Question of Palestine has regained its primacy on the international agenda, prompting the search for an exit strategy from the genocidal war, which risks sparking further regional conflicts. The two-state solution and recognition of Palestine as a state have resurfaced strongly as the way forward. Prime Minister of Norway, Jonas Gahr Støre (2024), perfectly captures this rationale in the following statement:

Recently, we had normalisation agreements between some Arab countries and Israel, as attempts to create stability and peace in the Middle East. But without solving the Palestinian question. What we need to achieve now is normalisation—with a solution to the Palestinian question. Norway sees this—and even more importantly—the United States, the Arab countries, the EU and China also see it more clearly.

In this context, several European states, including Spain, Malta, Ireland, Norway, Belgium and Slovenia, expressed their intentions to utilize their recognition prerogative to revive the debate around the two-state solution. Building on this renewed international focus on recognition, the PA resubmitted Palestine's application for UN membership to the Security Council in April 2024, which the US vetoed. The following month, however, the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly voted in support of granting Palestine its full membership (UNGA 2024). This new status granted Palestine new state privileges, including the ability to set agendas with other UN member states, submit motions, proposals and amendments, and the right to be elected to participate in various committees of the UNGA (UN 2024). On May 10, 2024, Ireland, Norway and Spain joined the 140 states that voted for granting Palestine full membership—twelve days before declaring their collective or coordinated decision to extend their bilateral recognition of Palestine. The following section examines this decision in detail.

Coordinated Recognition of Palestine

The decision to recognize Palestine by the Governments of Ireland, Norway and Spain is rooted in widespread domestic support, as reflected in parliamentary debates, motions and decisions within these nations. A decade ago, in 2014, the Irish and Spanish parliaments passed non-binding resolutions urging their respective governments to recognize Palestine (Congress of Deputies 2014; Aljazeera 2014). Despite Norway's conservative stance regarding the recognition of Palestine, the issue was brought to the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget) proceedings. In May 2023, members from the Labour and Red parties submitted a proposal calling on the Norwegian Parliament to urge the Government to prepare for recognition of Palestine, adhere to the UN Apartheid Convention and enforce a ban on Israeli goods and services originating from the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) (Stortinget 2023b). On October 24, 2023, the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee rejected this proposal (Stortinget 2023a). However, when it was put to the vote on 14 November, the Parliament approved the section on recognition, formally requesting the Government to 'be prepared to recognize as a separate state,' when appropriate (Stortinget 2023c).

Despite the broad popular support, the official policy of Ireland, Norway, and Spain was fixated on deferring the question of recognition until a final agreement is reached between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel on the outstanding ‘permanent status’ issues outlined in the Oslo Accords, which would supposedly lead to the implementation of the two-state solution (Qurie 2006). However, this solution has become increasingly impractical due to Israel’s opposition to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the OPT and the continuous appropriation of Palestinian land by successive Israeli governments (Netanyahu 2023; Smotrich 2023; B’Tselem 2021; Ben-Ami 2022). The peace negotiations dragged on for three decades before ultimately being abandoned. As the Israeli society and political system have shifted further to the far-right, the prospect of ‘reviving’ the peace process has vanished, effectively removing it from the international agenda. Consequently, the waiting factor has become increasingly an insincere excuse.

After securing a third term as Prime Minister of Spain, Pedro Sánchez aspired to bolster his country’s foreign policy standing as a ‘first-rate international actor’ (Sánchez 2023). Generally, recognition of states, particularly Palestine with all its symbolic resonance, provides an opportune avenue for this ambition. It is worthwhile to note that in 2014, the Swedish coalition government, comprised of the Social Democrats and the Green Party, situated the recognition of Palestine within Sweden’s broader framework of ‘active foreign policy’ then (Badarin 2020; Swedish Government 2014). Amidst the genocidal war on Gaza and in pursuit of a diplomatic resolution, the Spanish Government actively championed for the recognition of Palestine in collaboration with other European countries and EU institutions. In this context, Ireland, Norway and Spain found it imperative to reverse the traditional order. As a result, they advocated for recognition first, then negotiations (Norwegian Government 2024; Department of the Taoiseach 2024; Harris 2024). As Prime Minister Sánchez asserted, ‘[t]he international community will not be able to help the Palestinian State if it does not first recognize its existence,’ and proceeded to announce, ‘Spain is prepared to recognize the Palestinian State’ (Sánchez 2023). Similarly, Prime Minister (Taoiseach) Simon Harris of Ireland emphasized that the ‘decision to recognize Palestine should not have to wait indefinitely’ (Harris 2024). By reversing the order, and prioritizing recognition ahead of a final agreement, the aim is to eliminate the Israeli ‘veto’ on the establishment of the Palestinian state (Martin 2024a).

In summarizing the reasons for recognizing Palestine, Sánchez condensed them into a three-word motto: ‘peace, justice, and coherence’ (Sánchez 2024). However, the extent of the perceived of peace and justice remains bounded by the framework of the two-state solution and negotiations. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of states, including Ireland, Norway, and Spain, view the establishment of a Palestinian state as a prerequisite for peace and stability in the Middle East and for fulfilling Palestinian rights to self-determination and independence, as evidenced by the voting recording of states in the UN on the question of Palestine. Recognition is also intended to provide the Palestinian people with a glimmer of ‘hope’ and a sense of assurance by suggesting that the international system and law will bolster their position in future negotiations with Israel. In this regard, Sánchez emphasized the importance of

negotiating on an ‘equal footing,’ a message that was echoed by the Foreign Minister of Ireland, who asserted that recognition enables the Palestinians to negotiate as ‘equals—as two states’ (Martin 2024b). While recognition provides a degree of symbolic and normative impact, it is dubious that it can confer a significant shift in the immense power imbalance between Israel, a settler-colonial state, and the Palestinians, who have been under the oppressive structures of colonization for over a century (Veracini 2006; Khalidi 2006, 2020).

In the absence of concrete support to help the Palestinians defend themselves, recognition was conveyed to provide consistency and coherence to the foreign policy of the recognizing countries. The disparity between the joint European stance on Ukraine and Palestine has highlighted the sheer hypocrisy and inconsistency of the foreign policy of the EU and its member states. Ireland, Norway, and Spain have been among the few Western countries critical of the Israeli onslaught on the Palestinians in Gaza. While important, this criticism remained at the level of inconsequential rhetoric. Ireland, Norway, and Spain presented recognition as a concrete action. Prime Minister Sánchez, for example, juxtaposed his country’s policy towards Palestine and Ukraine to assert the coherence of his foreign policy. He argued: ‘We defend the same position in Ukraine as in Palestine, and it is the United Nations Charter and international legality’ (Sánchez 2024). However, framing recognition as a mechanism to offer a semblance of balance between their policies towards Ukraine and Palestine is profoundly misleading.

International consensus has been a central factor propelling the recognition of Palestine (Badarin 2021a). Following Sweden’s 2014 recognition of Palestine, Ireland, Norway, and Spain asserted that their decisions aligned with the international consensus regarding the two-state solution and the need to establish a Palestinian state, which at the time was recognized by 144 states and numerous international and regional organizations. Alignment with international consensus and the consistency of foreign policy also underpinned the bilateral recognition of Palestine by Barbados, Jamaica, the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and the Bahamas between April and May 2024. For example, Foreign Minister of Barbados, Kerrie Symmonds, highlighted the ‘incongruity and inconsistency’ of supporting a two-state solution without recognizing Palestine, asking, ‘How can we say we want a two-state solution if we do not recognize Palestine as a State?’ (MOFA - Barbados 2024) As Western European countries, Ireland, Norway, and Spain added their political weight to the international consensus in an attempt to encourage other European states to follow their example and recognize Palestine (Department of the Taoiseach 2024; Norwegian Government 2024; Sánchez 2024; Harris 2024). From their perspective, further recognition of Palestine by other European states would generate a ‘renewed momentum’ that is needed to ‘restart’ the peace talks, strengthen the Palestinian Authority and promote its ‘moderate’ (that is, Western-aligned) leadership (Norwegian Government 2024; Eide 2024). These actions reflect the typical elements of security-driven Western rationalities, particularly in the Middle East.

Ireland, Norway, and Spain situated their decision to recognize Palestine within the wider regional security and political framework of the Middle East. Several Arab and European states, along with the US, have been engaged in formulating a new

political framework, dubbed the Arab Peace Initiative (API), to plan for the day after the current genocidal war on Gaza. While little has been disclosed about the details of this framework, an examination of recent discourse from Ireland, Norway, and Spain on the recognition of Palestine reveals significant clues. The new API appears to be a watered-down version of the original 2002 API, which offered peace and normalization between all Arab states and Israel in exchange for ending the Israeli occupation of the territories it conquered in 1967, establishing a Palestinian state and achieving a just resolution to the Palestinian refugee question based on the UN Resolution 194 (API 2002).

In principle, the new API follows the same logic as its precursor. However, since the creation of a Palestinian state has become virtually unattainable—due to the deep colonization of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, as well as the destruction of much of the Gaza Strip, the initiative adopted vague notions and euphemisms. Terms such as creating a ‘pathway,’ taking ‘irreversible steps’ and establishing an ‘irreversible process’ to implement the two-state solution and empower the PA constitute the backbone of the new API (Martin 2024a). The US has endorsed the general framework of ‘normalization, with security assurances [for Israel], with the pathway to a Palestinian state’ (Blinken 2024). Indeed, the PA and its leadership not only lack the capacity to represent the Palestinian people, but have also become a key sub-structure of the Israeli settler-colonial order, conducting local governance and security functions in coordination with Israel (Naser-Najjab and Hever 2021; Doc.4676 2009). The new API sidesteps the facticity of settler-colonial conditions, and instead pursues the ‘revival’ of the so-called peace process, wherein Palestinians and Israelis would supposedly negotiate on ‘equal footing’ due to the recognition of Palestine as a state. From this perspective, recognition of Palestine would supposedly achieve multiple goals, including the establishment of a Palestinian state, normalization between Israel and Arab states and regional stabilization (Norwegian Government 2024; Martin 2024b; Department of the Taoiseach 2024). Norway has also revealed another goal: the ‘demobilization of Hamas and other [Palestinian] armed groups’ (Norwegian Government 2024).

Although state recognition can be withdrawn, it tends to be enduring and almost irreversible. However, recognition of Palestine makes little difference on the ground in the absence of concrete policies to force Israel to comply with international law. If the international community has proven unwilling to compel Israel to adhere to decisions of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the world’s highest legal body, there is little chance of reversing the colonial realities in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. Governments recognize new states. Therefore, while official recognition tends to stick, its political effect may change depending on the ideological and political persuasion of successive governments. For instance, several Eastern European states that recognized Palestine in 1988 when they were members of the Soviet Bloc, such as Hungary and the Czech Republic, have since become staunch supporters of Israel and have often voted against the recognition of Palestine in the UN (UNGA 2024; UN 2012). Argentina and Sweden provide another example. Despite recognizing Palestine in 2010, the current conservative government of Argentina opposed Palestine’s bid for membership in the UN. Similarly, in May 2024, the

current right-wing coalition government of Sweden, in cooperation with the Sweden Democrats—a party with neo-Nazi and xenophobic roots (Robsahm 2020)—chose to back Israel’s actions, characterizing its genocidal war as proportional and legitimate self-defence (Billström 2023a). At the same time, Sweden refused to support the UN General Assembly resolution that affirmed Palestine’s qualifications for UN membership (UNGA 2024) despite Sweden’s official recognition of Palestine since 2014.

Indeed, the withdrawal of Sweden’s recognition of Palestine has been vigorously debated in the Swedish Parliament (Söder 2023). Sweden’s Foreign Minister, Tobias Billström, stressed the inconsequential impact of his country’s recognition, which, as he put it, ‘did not make any difference, but it was pure symbolic politics’ in practice. He argued that the decision not to withdraw it was to preserve the integrity of Swedish diplomacy (Billström 2023b, 2024). In view of the growing right-wing politics across Europe, a decline in the political and symbolic impact of the recent recognition from Ireland, Norway, or Spain is something to reckon with in the future.

If history provides any guidance, the new API and the notion of pathway to statehood are suspicious and must be critically considered. Since the mid-1970s, Western countries have conditioned the recognition of the PLO and its engagement in the peace process on surrendering the Palestinian legal right to use armed struggle against the Israeli colonialism (UNGA Resolution 37/43 1982). In this light, associating the recognition of Palestine with the demobilization of resistance, armed or otherwise, in exchange for ‘restarting’ another ‘process’ further weakens the Palestinians and exacerbates the power imbalance between them and Israel. While Hamas has long accepted the premise of the two-state solution based on international law (an independent Palestinian state on pre-1967 borders and the return of the Palestinian refugees), in April 2024, it explicitly stated that it is ready to lay down its military capabilities and integrate them into the structure of the Palestinian state after its establishment (al-Hayya 2024; Hamas 2017; N.A. 2006). Moreover, Israel rejected the API in 2002, and there is no reason to believe it will accept, let alone implement, the new API. In May 2024, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who frequently shuttled between Israel and Saudi Arabia to broker a normalization agreement between the two states, stated that ‘Israel is not able or willing to’ accept ‘a credible pathway to a Palestinian state’ in exchange for normalization with Saudi Arabia (cited in Bassist 2024).

Presenting and Performing State Recognition

Little attention has been paid in the literature to how states present and perform their prerogative to recognize other states. However, in the age of fast information and social media, we should not underestimate the political significance of presenting and performing recognition. Many non-European states have recognized Palestine without drawing much attention from the world. Between April and May 2024, for example, four Caribbean states declared their recognition of Palestine through brief statements from their foreign ministers or by publishing their decisions in media releases on the homepage of their respective ministries of foreign affairs (MOFA - Barbados 2024; MOFA - Bahamas, Ministry of Foreign Affairs - The Bahamas 2024; MFAFA -

Jamaica, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade 2024; MOF-CARICOM Trinidad, Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs 2024). To avoid tensions with the US and Israel, Mexico quietly recognized Palestine by upgrading the PLO delegation to an embassy and designating the Palestinian head of the diplomatic mission as ‘Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador’ (Government of Mexico 2016; Hackbarth 2023). Since June 2023, the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has included Mexico on the list of states that officially recognize Palestine (MOFA -Palestine, n.d.).

While the four Caribbean states declared their recognition of Palestine separately, their decisions exhibit features of collective or coordinated recognition. First, their timing aligns closely. Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago issued declarations of recognition around the same period, from April 19 to May 7, 2024. Second, these declarations adopted a comparable form and content. They presented and justified their decisions using similar discourses, emphasizing notions of consensus, consistency, respect for the UN Charter and the people’s right to self-determination, while advocating for the two-state solution. Third, their recognition completes the consensus within the Caribbean bloc on the Palestinian statehood issue, as all Caribbean states have now recognized Palestine.

On the other hand, Ireland, Norway, and Spain presented their recognition of Palestine in a distinctive and highly publicized manner, similar to Sweden’s approach in 2014 (Badarin 2020). These states invested significant political capital in openly discussing and publicizing their ‘intentions, willingness, and readiness’ to recognize Palestine over several months, from November 2023 to May 2024. During this period, extensive political debates, media statements and consultations were held within and between these states and with other actors, such as the European Commission, European Council, UN officials, Arab governments, US officials and other heads of state (Sánchez 2023; Varadkar et al. 2024).

On May 22, 2024, a week before the recognition took effect, the prime ministers of Norway, Ireland, and Spain coordinated their announcements of their respective governments’ decisions to recognize Palestine in three successive press conferences in Oslo, Dublin, and Madrid. These declarations and press conferences made global headlines, drawing significant media coverage, political commentaries and analyses. A week later, on 27 May, 2024, the three countries issued a joint press release confirming the recognition of Palestine and restating the reasons behind it (MOFA Ireland 2024).

Not only did the three Prime Ministers announce the decision, but they also presented synchronized narratives detailing the reasons for extending this recognition. As discussed earlier, these narratives echoed each other and reiterated the almost identical political reasoning explaining why they extended their recognition of Palestine. The relatively long period between declaring the intention of recognition and its actual implementation constructed a political context and attracted further media attention, which helped increase the political weight of this symbolic act, raised awareness and imposed the recognition of Palestine into the discourse of other European states and media platforms. For instance, recognition of Palestine has been a key topic in current political debates in Denmark (which Parliament opposed it by

83 to 21 votes), France, Malta, Slovenia, the UK and the US, among others (Dawson 2024; Axios 2024; Folkettinget 2024; Le Monde 2022, 2024; Government of Slovenia 2024). This calculated diplomatic performance of recognition by Ireland, Norway, and Spain bestowed a larger strategic political impact on what is typically considered a symbolic and normative act, aiming to bring about what these countries referred to as ‘a fundamental paradigm shift’ (MOFA Ireland 2024; Martin 2024a). This shift includes, for example, swaying other (particularly EU) states to follow suit, creating political momentum for building a new regional security framework in the Middle East, reviving the so-called peace process and the two-state solution and revitalize the PA and its leadership. The presentation and performance of recognition were calculated as an essential part of the practice of state recognition, particularly by reshaping the discourse around the fundamental political and strategic factors underlying it.

Conclusion

State recognition constitutes the heart of international society. However, our knowledge of this practice remains underdeveloped, as the emergence and recognition of new states are relatively rare occurrences. This article contributes to our understanding of recognition politics by examining the coordinated recognition of Palestine by Ireland, Norway, and Spain. Since Palestine satisfies the post-1945 international norms that usually regulate the recognition of new states, decisions to recognize Palestine or not are highly political and respond to specific political contexts, as manifested in the narratives presented above. In terms of context, the current wave of recognition by Ireland, Norway, and Spain (with other European countries potentially following suit in the future) evolved amidst an unfolding genocide in Gaza, as well as extreme levels of violence and colonization in the West Bank and East Jerusalem (and expanding to the South Lebanon at the time of writing). A similar political context enveloped Sweden’s recognition of Palestine back in 2014.

The justification for recognizing Palestine operates on two interconnected levels. The first stems from the foreign policy ambitions of the recognizing state, both in general and specifically in the Middle East. Admitting new states into the international society falls within the realm of high politics; it entails both rewards and costs, especially in conflict situations. Recognizing states often carefully consider retaliation from concerned actors, in this case, Israel or its allies, in the form of economic or diplomatic sanctions. On the other hand, recognition may enable states to enhance their international stature and diplomatic actorness. The issue of consistency, or rather inconsistency, in foreign policy and aligning with international consensus become significant factors to bolster the moral standing of the recognizing state within the international society. Hence, questions of foreign policy consistency are of central significance in the decision-making process regarding the recognition of new states. In the context of Palestine/Israel, recognition has been closely associated with regional geopolitical and security frameworks, with the two-state solution at the heart of these frameworks.

The nation-state and the practice of state recognition are European constructs. European recognition has been fundamental for bestowing external legitimacy on

emerging sovereignties and facilitating their admission into the society of states (Ringmar 2012; Krasner 1999; Anghie 2004). This explains why recognition from European states has been perceived to hold a high normative and symbolic value than, for example, the Caribbean states. However, this value correlates with Europe's soft/normative and hard power, which has been declining due to the ongoing global geopolitical transition and the redistribution of power away from Europe, or the West generally, to rising non-European countries (Newman and Visoka 2021; Stuenkel 2016; Mignolo 2012; Badarin 2023b). Moreover, Western direct and indirect involvement in the genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza has further fractured its moral standing in the Global South. This suggests that the added value of European recognition is diminishing. The degeneration of the political and symbolic value of recognition may also arise due to changes in the political and ideological profiles of successive governments.

At its core, the narratives offered by Ireland, Norway, and Spain, as well as how they were presented, echoed the Swedish narrative and presentation. In other words, the narratives justifying the recognition of Palestine have become a monotonous formula lacking innovation and political vision, and, more importantly, it is disconnected from the reality of Israeli settler-colonization on the ground. Remarkably, they reiterated a decade-old narrative at a time of unfolding genocide, massive war crimes and crimes against humanity. Ironically, the most dominant contextual element, namely, genocide, got lost. From this vantage point, the recognition of Palestine, which is intended as a medium for repackaging and 'reviving' the failed framework of the two-state solution, may be a sign of helplessness, even more so when recognition is presented not as a substitute for actual policies but as a concrete 'action.' Recognition remains a symbolic act whose power and effect are deeply contingent and uncertain, especially when it is unmatched by tangible policies and sanctions or when the recognized entity lacks facts of sovereignty. It is worthwhile to conclude by recalling how Sweden's Foreign Minister perceived and acted on his country's recognition of Palestine as a 'pure symbolic politics' that 'did not make any difference.' Nothing could be more accurate.

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