

Israel-Hamas war

The vexed road to recognition of a Palestinian state



Gesture has become a punishment for Israel, says former Israeli leader

Mehul Srivastava in Tel Aviv

Published YESTERDAY

In declaring that they intend to recognise a Palestinian state, Britain, France and Canada have moved closer to a step that Palestinians have sought for decades.

But their announcements leave unanswered a crucial question: in the gritty context of today's conflict — with Israel waging war in a shattered Gaza Strip, threatening to annex the occupied West Bank and administering East Jerusalem as part of its own capital — what is left of Palestine to recognise?

They also upend the sequence of the now-moribund Middle East peace process, in which detailed talks between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization were intended to be followed by international recognition of whatever Palestinian state emerged from those discussions.

Former Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert said the gesture by Israel's western allies of recognising Palestine had taken on a different meaning.

What was intended to be a reward for Palestinians — a celebration for successfully ending more than eight decades of conflict — had in 2025 become a punishment for Israel.

It was a reflection of “the real desperation of losing trust”, said Olmert, whose premiership between 2006 and 2009 was the last time an Israeli leader seriously tussled with the complexities of a two-state solution.

To Olmert, it is as if they are saying to his successor, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: “You didn't listen to us, to anything we are trying to do — so what else do we have but to use this, something you are so opposed to.”

Olmert said the promised recognitions amount to a threat to dismantle the legacy of

Israel's longest-serving premier, who has spent his nearly two decades in power blocking a Palestinian state from taking shape.



Then Israeli deputy prime minister Ehud Olmert, left, shakes hands with Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas in November 2005 © Gerard Cerles/AFP/Getty Images

Netanyahu's governments have expanded settlements, taken more land into Israeli state control and demonised the internationally accepted Palestinian Authority as supporters of terrorism akin to Hamas, the militant group that wrested Gaza from the PA in 2007.

Netanyahu has lambasted the British and French proposals as a reward for Hamas, which triggered the current war with its cross-border October 7 2023 raid on southern Israel.

Now Netanyahu, who refuses to take responsibility for the scale of civilian suffering that Israel has wrought on Gaza, faces the prospect of four out of five permanent UN Security Council members recognising the state of [Palestine](#). China and Russia have already done so.

This would deepen Israel's diplomatic isolation as it fights accusations of genocide at the International Court of Justice, the UN's highest court, and as the premier himself

faces charges of war crimes at the [International Criminal Court](#).

The pledges by three G7 nations to recognise a Palestinian state ahead of the UN General Assembly in September all come with conditions.

UK Prime Minister Sir Keir [Starmer's hinge on Netanyahu](#) ending the crisis in Gaza, while Canada is demanding that the PA, run by the ageing and unpopular President Mahmoud Abbas, enacts serious reforms and hold its first elections in nearly two decades.



Statehood faces difficulties as formidable today as it did in 1988, when PLO chair Yasser Arafat set out a formal claim to a Palestinian nation © Patrick Robert/Sygma/Getty Images

The announcements have been met with deep hostility from Netanyahu's far-right coalition, which is propped up by parties seeking to annex the West Bank.

The last time Netanyahu — reluctantly — engaged with the peace process was in 2014, under great pressure from the Obama administration.

The process of recognising a Palestinian state would also run up against the limits of international law: the 1933 Montevideo Convention sets out minimum criteria for a state, which include a permanent population, defined borders and a government.

That is one reason that Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has insisted that the PA — a semi-autonomous body set up by the Oslo Accords in the 1990s — commit to reforms that would restore a measure of democratic legitimacy to Abbas's government, said a Canadian diplomat briefed on the matter.

Palestinian statehood also faces practical difficulties as formidable today as it did in 1988, when PLO chair Yasser Arafat first set out a formal claim to a Palestinian nation that mingled the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish with the prose of UN resolutions. He created a government in exile, based in Algiers.

Most crucially, Israel controls all the borders and occupies the land on which any Palestinian state could be built. World powers have largely supported Palestinians governing an area that roughly aligns with the 1967 armistice line, which includes the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip — territories wrested from Jordan and Egypt by Israel.

Defence minister Israel Katz, whose government in May announced plans to build 22 new West Bank settlements, has said of the push for recognition: “They will recognise a Palestinian state on paper — and we will build the Jewish-Israeli state on the ground.”

Yet even if western recognition would bring little change in the territory, Palestinians say it would buoy morale and add weight to the beleaguered PLO’s claim to statehood.

“It would still be very useful because it confirms the right of self-determination for the Palestinian people, which Israel is trying to eliminate,” said Mustafa Barghouti, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council and regular interlocutor with western diplomats.

“The issue of recognition is a political matter — admitting into law what these countries always speak about, the two-state solution.”

Palestinian delegations to the UK, France or Canada would also become fully fledged embassies, getting diplomatic rights and immunities, and able to sign treaties as a state.





Israel's prime minister David Ben-Gurion (centre left with jacket), with his wife and friends, oversees the last contingent of British troops leaving Haifa docks in April 1948 © Bettmann Archive

“States have allies, allies have responsibilities,” said a Palestinian diplomat based in the UK. “Until then, all we have as Palestinians are friends.”

These recognitions would undermine Israel’s traditional argument that it is not alone in opposing unilateral Palestinian statehood, said Victor Kattan, who has served as a legal adviser to the Palestinian Negotiations Affairs Department in Ramallah.

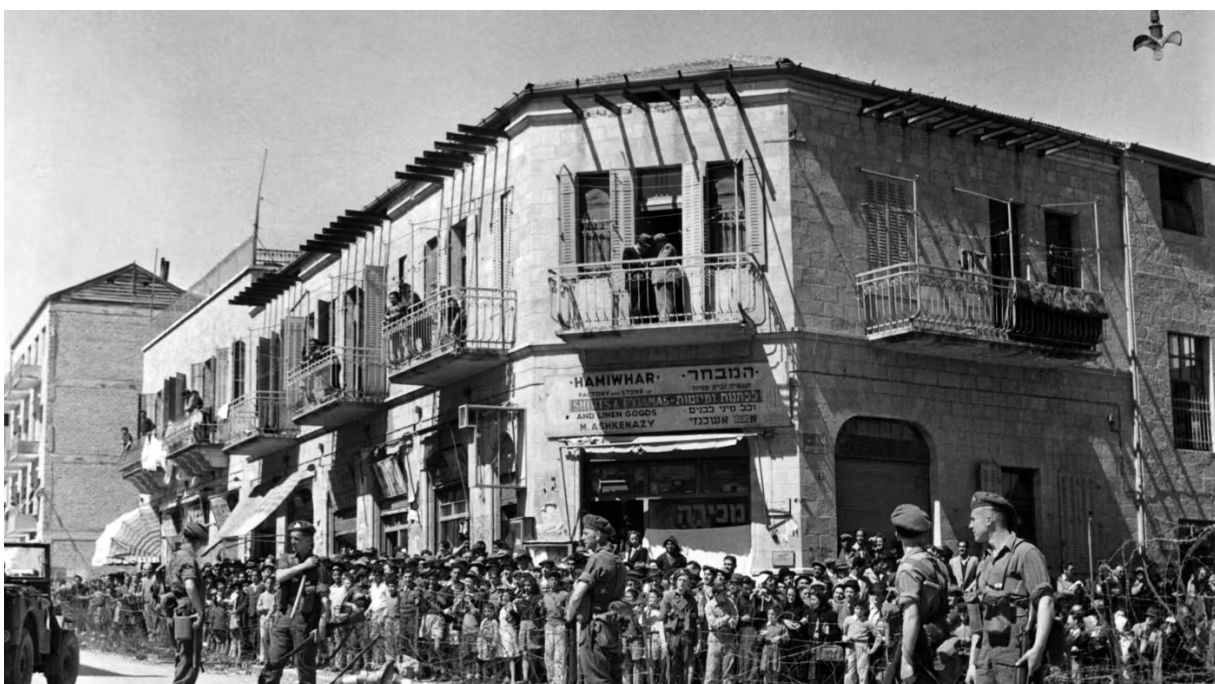
Some 147 countries already recognise a Palestinian state, but the addition of the UK, France and Canada would represent a significant shift on the part of powerful western states traditionally seen as Israel’s unflinching allies.

That shift is especially resonant on the part of the UK, the colonial power that administered Mandate Palestine after the first world war, issuing the Balfour Declaration that paved the way for a Jewish state to take shape on Palestinian land, and fuelling a conflict that rages decades later.

“The Israelis had always had a strong ‘moral minority’ argument, that so long as some of the major western states . . . still don’t recognise Palestine, there will always be a question mark over its claims to statehood and sovereignty,” said Kattan, who now teaches international law at the University of Nottingham.

“But now that that’s crumbling — it looks like nearly everybody is going to recognise Palestine, except for the United States — it greatly strengthens Palestinian claims to statehood.”

The moves by the UK, France and Canada have infuriated the White House, with US President Donald Trump saying they pose a threat to trade talks with Canada. The US’s long-standing policy has been to resist attempts by supporters of Palestine to assume some of the markers of statehood.





A Jewish neighbourhood of Jerusalem under martial law which was imposed in 1947-48 © Intercontinentale/AFP/Getty Images

On Thursday, the state department imposed sanctions on the PLO, for among other things “taking actions to internationalise its conflict with Israel such as through the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice”.

Other diplomatic efforts to upgrade Palestinian claims to statehood are also under way, said western diplomats based in Jerusalem, including an attempt to upgrade the fledgling state of Palestine’s UN “observer status” to full membership.

The US has twice vetoed those attempts, most recently in April 2024.

One of the diplomats said: “They will undoubtedly veto again — but this time, they will be running against a large wave of international opinion, not just a technical vote that is ignored as a matter of course.”

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2025. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

Israel-Hamas war

US foreign policy

FT Edit

Government of Israel

Palestinian Authority