

# **De-Europeanisation or a different Europe? Sweden and the 2014 unilateral recognition of Palestine**

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyses Sweden's decision to recognise Palestine in 2014 and it aims to understand whether this was a case of de-Europeanisation, defined as positively attempting to get rid of any perceived restraints imposed by European foreign policy, or a way for Sweden to promote EU foreign policy, possibly in a different guise. The paper overviews the debate about Europeanisation and makes three points. First, pre-existing foreign policy practices at the EU and the national level showed that Sweden has a strong tradition of working through the EU, but recognition of Palestine was not expected to be executed at the EU level. Second, it shows that Sweden's decision was motivated by domestic politics and justified with a desire to actively break away from the previous pattern of Swedish foreign policy. Third, the paper argues that the impact of Sweden's decision has been long-lasting in terms of limiting the discussion on Palestine's recognition, but has also enhanced the role of Sweden within the EU foreign policy system, thus suggesting that the nature of EU foreign policy cooperation is changing.

## **1. Introduction**

There are those who will argue that our decision to recognise the State of Palestine is premature. If anything, I fear that it is too late. New Israeli settlement decisions have hampered a two-state solution. The purpose of our recognition is to contribute to a future where Israel and Palestine live side by side in peaceful coexistence (Swedish Foreign Minister, Margot Wallström 2014).

On 30 October 2014, the Swedish government recognized Palestine as a sovereign state, amid discussions on the same topic in several of member states' national parliaments. As both recognition and the Arab-Israeli conflict have a long history in European foreign policy

discussions, we can read the Swedish decision in different ways. Was Sweden leading the group of countries within the EU that supported the Palestinian ‘cause’ and aimed to impart new life in the by-then defunct Middle East Peace Process (MEPP)? If so, it could be argued that its “unilateral move aimed at changing the terms of the debate” (Martins, 2015, p.283) within the EU. Or was the Swedish decision breaking ranks with European partners, and venturing on a road that had not been pursued before, given that member states recognising Palestine did so prior to admission into the EU?<sup>1</sup> If so, recognition would entail distancing Sweden from European integration. A third and different take on this subject aims to capture the significance of Sweden’s action in the contemporary context of EU member states’ foreign policies, characterised by a partial renationalisation of foreign policies that remain however anchored in EU foreign policy. While CFSP continues to provide a multilateral setting for European cooperation, unilateral actions within such a multilateral context have become not only more frequent but also considered appropriate. The new European ‘normal’ entails unilateral actions that remain anchored to a multilateral context, as the Swedish case shows. They might even signal the ‘national rescue of European foreign policy,’ to turn Milward’s argument round (1992).

Swedish recognition of Palestine is an interesting case to study in relation to EU foreign policy, because of its image as a reliable partner in the CFSP that had been consistently nurtured since becoming member in 1995. Academic research has consistently shown how Swedish foreign policy has been Europeanized at all levels. Therefore, exploring this question allows us to explore change and stability in processes of Europeanization. The Swedish decision came at the very start of a new coalition government taking office in Sweden after winning the general election. For the Swedish Social Democrats and the Greens (their junior partner in government), the recognition of Palestine was a symbolic issue that they had committed themselves to at previous party congresses. Shortly after the recognition of Palestine, Sweden launched its campaign for a seat on the UN Security Council (2017-18) with a slogan of being an “independent voice” with “global commitments”. Given Swedish membership of the EU’s foreign and security policy this raised many eyebrows around Europe and became a controversial issue in the domestic debate surrounding the candidature and was later withdrawn. Yet, the resurgence of a national foreign policy role conception with roots dating back to a time when Sweden punched above its weight as a middle power under the premiership of Olof Palme was unmistakable.

This is also an interesting case from the point of view of EU foreign policy, especially in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the issue of recognition. The Lisbon Treaty of 2009 was meant to enhance the EU’s ability to speak with a more unison voice in international affairs. With the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the strengthened position of the High Representative, the central function of coordination and representation were formally delegated from the rotating national Presidency to Brussels. Yet, the impact of these reforms in our case is questionable. Similarly, when we look at the involvement of EU member states in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there are multiple trends at work. The Arab-Israeli conflict has been a core issue in European foreign policy dating back to the early days of the European Political Cooperation and Europe remains a key player (and payer) in negotiations, being for instance represented as the EU in the Middle East Quartet. At the same time, there seems to be a rise of national initiatives, the latest example being the French initiative to re-launch the Middle East peace talks by hosting high-level diplomatic meetings in Paris on 3 June 2016 and

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<sup>1</sup> The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Malta, Romania and Cyprus recognized Palestine in 1988, prior to becoming members of the European Union.

15 January 2017. Recognition, too, is a contested field in European foreign policy, with a long history of consultations on what remains ultimately a national prerogative.

Our argument, therefore, is that confronted with two partially Europeanised topics in EU foreign policy, and despite the changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, the Swedes decided to go ‘solo’ on recognising Palestine as a sovereign state, a decision that shows the limits of European solidarity in EU foreign policy. Much of the dilemma lies in the degree of coordination that Sweden attempted to achieve before, during and after its recognition of Palestine. As we are going to see, while Sweden had a history of cooperating in CFSP on this topic, its coordination with fellow members in the run up to the decision and its wake has been limited, but this has not limited Swedish engagement with EU foreign policy on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The paper is organized into four main parts. We begin the paper with a discussion of how the European Union in the past has handled the issue of recognition and we show how a collective practice has not prevailed over the formal national prerogative in this field and the tensions that conditional recognition has created among EU member states. The second part focuses on the Europeanization of foreign policy and points to the consensus in the academic literature that Swedish foreign policy has become deeply embedded in EU foreign policy-making since it joined in 1995 which makes our case a deviant one. In the third part, we trace the process towards the decision to recognise Palestine and note the absence of an EU perspective in these political deliberations. At best, it can be seen as an attempt to ‘lead the way’ by example. In the fourth part, we examine how the European Union and its member states responded to the Swedish decision to ‘break ranks’ and crucially what this tells us about European solidarity in EU foreign policy. The empirical study is drawn from primary interview data with Swedish and European diplomats conducted in the spring of 2016.

## **2. Europeanization or de-Europeanization?**

While the literature on member states’ foreign policies has always been cautious in applying to foreign policy concepts developed in relation to Europeanization, for long there has been a consensus that ‘Europeanization matters’ also in this complex field. But with the wind of change becoming more apparent, it is time to reassess this debate, in order to understand not only how best to frame this phenomenon, but also how to appreciate its directionality. We will argue in favour of maintaining a cross-loading dimension to our analysis, because the downloading and uploading processes can be of limited relevance, as the case of Palestine’s recognition shows. We also suggest ways of differentiating Europeanization from de-Europeanization, by highlighting three specific aspects: prior Europeanization, intention to break away, impact on existing EU foreign policy practice.

Downloading and uploading processes are widely considered the key dimensions of Europeanization, defined as “a process of structural change, variously affecting actors and institutions, ideas and interests” (Featherstone, 2003, p.3) In fact, it has been argued that downloading, understood as the impact of EU practices onto member states’ domestic level, is the only analytically original concept (e.g. Moumoutzis, 2011, p.610). Scholars using both terms (instead of e.g. just downloading in conjunction with European integration) stress on the contrary the co-constitution of the two processes, which simultaneously interact and impact on the two levels (Tonra, 2015). The uploading process relates to the construction of EU foreign policy (Alecú de Flers & Müller, 2012, p.22), in the form of projection of national foreign policy priorities, but also a propensity to work through the EU in their achievement.

Cross-loading (“perhaps the least developed process” in analytical terms, (Tonra, 2015, p.184) attempts instead to capture “not only change *due* to Europe but also *within* Europe” (Major, 2005, p.186). From this perspective, Europe is the frame for change, rather than its origin. The mechanisms in this case are less hierarchical and more centred on what has been termed governance by “facilitated coordination” (Bulmer and Radaelli 2004, p.). It has been argued that cross-loading does not represent an analytical category distinct from uploading (Alecú de Flers & Müller, 2012). However, the analytical advantages are, in our opinion, more than the disadvantages. Not only cross-loading can be used to analyse identity issues and the redefinition of national interests in the context of ‘Europe’ (Wong, 2007; Wong & Hill, 2011a, p.4), but also it contributes to zoom in on the embeddedness of member states’ national foreign policies, by highlighting how they relate to EU positions and to each other. A focus on cross-loading allows to turn the two dimensions of national and EU foreign policies into a continuum composed in the middle of a ‘primeval soup’ in which ideas, practices and power float between the two poles in an interesting variety of possible combinations, some of which centred on state-to-state contacts.

In terms of directionality, the assumption has for long been that variation is a matter for more or less Europeanization, as in e.g. leaders and laggards (Börzel, 2000). Divergence was expected to happen (Héritier & Knill, 2000), but this was considered the exception, rather than the rule. The bottom line was that member states conducted “all but the most limited foreign policies objectives inside an EU context” (Manners & Whitman, 2000, p.243). While member states may resist institutionalisation of EU practices and automatic reflexes, “even the definitions of what constitutes the ‘European’ or the ‘national’ interest” were seen as altered by the Brusselisation of the EU foreign policy making process (Wong & Hill, 2011a, p.8).

Still, several pointers have existed that suggested the opposite type of process, a question that has acquired new momentum. In his seminal article, Hill argued that in the wake of 9/11, there was evidence of both renationalising and regrouping among member states, as fragmentation and lack of unity coexisted with a renewed will by member states to make CFSP work (2004). Moreover, it was clear that national specificities remained in foreign affairs, be it in the case of the UK as an ‘awkward partner’ (cf.), Greece and its liberal use of veto power (Tsardanidis & Stavridis, 2005), or of Denmark and its opt outs (cf.). The assessment of France would have it on the cusp, between expected long term convergence (Wong, 2006) and persisting dreams of national *grandeur* (Blunden, 2000). Germany, thanks to its coordination reflex within the EU framework, was the exception, more than the rule, but it was also rediscovering, together with Italy, the possibility to pursue national goals while being shielded from accusations of repeating its past by participation in CFSP (Daehnhardt, 2011). Our point is further emphasised by the fact that examples of Europeanised foreign policies remain contested in the literature (Wong, 2011, p.163).

It is therefore legitimate to ask how we can distinguish between Europeanisation and de-Europeanisation, a rough definition for which is when member states are “positively attempting to [get] rid [...] of any perceived restraints imposed by European foreign policy” (Wong & Hill, 2011b, p.210). This is important. A strategic approach to EU foreign policy is not sufficient to qualify as de-Europeanisation, because it still encompasses working through the EU in a form of ‘thin’ Europeanisation. The issue is how to recognise a behaviour that ‘breaks ranks’ with established practices in EU foreign affairs.

Here we would like to stress that, for de-Europeanisation to occur, it must have an impact on both existing national *and* EU foreign policy practices. This has two aspects. First, there must be a pre-existing EU foreign policy practice and a pre-existing national practice that is at least

partially Europeanised. While this might seem self-evident, practices can be slippery to measure, and so is Europeanisation of national foreign practices (Wong, 2011, p.163). The EU has a clear position and an established practice on number of issues. However, very often there is room for interpretation about means for achieving agreed goals, or on the extent to which developments in international politics approximate desired and common goals.

Second, the impact on existing national and EU foreign policy practices must be considered. Some actions, disruptive as they might be at the time, do not really have an impact on the fabric of European cooperation, on established ways of doing things within EU foreign policy and more generally on the way in which national and EU foreign policies intersect. Others, which might look ‘only’ symbolic, can instead have long-lasting effects (e.g. Adler-Nissen, 2014). Member states have often acted so as to undermine an EU position, by for instance issuing a subsequent declaration distancing themselves from the EU or by reneging on it in bilateral relations. This has been the case when, for instance, the Czech Republic issued a statement on DAY? saying that it would never apply the labelling guidelines in terms of goods produced in Israeli settlements and imported into the EU.<sup>2</sup> Such a behaviour, however, can vary, from mere posturing (e.g. for domestic consumption) to lack of implementation. What matters is the impact on existing practices.

Here we can continue to use some of the categories that have been developed to address Europeanisation and draw a distinction between absorption (which involves a low level of adaptation), accommodation (a more substantial one) and transformation (a high impact) (Börzel & Risse, 2003). But we would use them to address the impact of national foreign policy actions on both EU foreign policy practices and established Europeanised patterns of such a member state.

When addressing break-away actions by a member state, therefore, we can envisage four possible paths:

- No pre-existing Europeanization, no de-Europeanisation: unless we subscribe to the view that national foreign policies have been fully subsumed into a system of EU foreign policy making, there is a possibility that national foreign policy behaviour simply relates to areas that are only marginally embedded in EU practices
- Pre-existing Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation: This occurs if there is transformation and substantial change in both the national and the EU level. Brexit is an exemplary instance of this path. Despite oddities and ‘awkward’ behaviour, several areas of UK foreign policies were Europeanised and are *en route* to instead being de-Europeanised. The impact on EU foreign policy practices is yet to be fully scrutinised, but it will be substantial, in terms of principles, procedures, expertise, etc.
- Pre-existing Europeanisation, a change in the nature of EU foreign policy practice: this is the case if the foreign policy action requires substantial accommodation in national and EU foreign policy practices.
- Pre-existing Europeanisation, no de-Europeanisation: this is the case if break-away behaviour is absorbed and recomposed within the limits of existing practices.

As we consider different paths for Europeanization and de-Europeanization, a more general question looms, though. What if the patterns of interaction between member states on matters of foreign affairs are actually changing across the board? What if break-away behaviour or some sort of contestation has become the new ‘normal’ within the European framework for

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<sup>2</sup> This is different from, for instance, the attempt to pre-empt the formation of an EU position or a straightforward veto to an emerging one, as there would be no Europeanised position if the latter.

cooperation? At what point shall we start talking about a new European fabric in terms of foreign policy practices, one that assumes a degree of contestation and relies on a (thinner) framework for European cooperation, but remains anchored in a European narrative? While Milward's original argument about European integration saw Europe as "the rescue of nation states" (1992), could we be witnessing the 'national rescue of European cooperation' through the reassessment of foreign policy practices and the development of a new foreign policy governance system, in which member states have more of a role? Hill hinted to this possibility when he stressed that post-Iraq war, member states were "regrouping" and showed "a renewed determination to address the gaps and weaknesses of the collective system" (Hill, 2004, p.144). We suggest that this might be more than just 'fixing' the old system, a point to which we return in the Conclusions.

### **3. Europe and the recognition of Palestine**

The issue of recognising Palestine falls into an odd category, in which two elements converge to define a weak EU foreign policy practice. Recognition of new states is a national competence, although member states have a long history of at least discussing it beforehand and trying to coordinate their national practices in the EU context. The Arab-Israeli conflict has an even longer history of appearing on EPC/CFSP debates and much unity has been forged out of conflicting national practices, although positions on when to recognise the 2<sup>nd</sup> state in the two-state solution remain deeply divided. Finally, Sweden's national foreign policy in relation to the issue is also ambiguous.

On recognition, the legal basis of EU foreign policy cooperation is weak, but the political debate goes back to the end of the Cold war. The discussion has at times delivered with no difficulty (such as in the recognition of South Sudan in July 2011) and at times floundered amid conflicting declarations by member states (such as in the case of Croatia and Slovenia in 1991 or of Kosovo in February 2008) (Ker-Lindsay, 2012, p.144-47). EU member states have contributed to the uncertainty by developing post-Cold War a set of conditional criteria for recognition, which stress political and domestic conditions. These criteria have made it more difficult for Europe to speak with one voice, as the basis for recognition becomes open to political evaluations. Therefore, the European practice of collective recognition since the dissolution of Yugoslavia has been relatively poor.

The case of Palestine is further complicated. The state of Palestine was declared in 1988, in response to the uprisings in the occupied Palestinian territories, even though at the time Palestine had none of the factual conditions specified in the Montevideo Convention. Several states recognised Palestine at the time, including Central and Eastern European countries (Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania), as well as Cyprus and Malta. All these countries became EU members in 2004 and have since toned down their support for the state of Palestine, with the exception of Malta.

Therefore, and in line with the international practice of "negotiations aiming at establishing a common line of action" (Lauterpacht, 1947/2013, p.69), the EU experience has taken the shape of a conversation prior to the decision to recognise a new state – a key point for our discussion of Sweden's recognition of Palestine, but not one that directly impacts on national decisions.

Second, there is an established EU foreign policy position, but it is not fully unified, thus leaving room to disagreements and different interpretations. Conditional recognition has been imported into European foreign policy also for the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The CFSP Declaration issued in Berlin in 1999 mentioned for the first time the possibility of a Palestinian

state, but qualified it with specific political conditions: “a democratic, viable and peaceful sovereign Palestinian State”. While the ‘viable’ was directed at Israel, the ‘democratic’ and ‘peaceful’ qualifiers were addressed to the Palestinians. In 2002, the issue was spelled further, as the EU indicated that negotiations should aim for “an end to the occupation and the early establishment of a democratic, viable, peaceful and sovereign State of Palestine.”<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, while the legal basis is clear on no EU competence, member states have gravitated towards some form of political coordination. However, the more member states introduce political criteria on which to make Palestine’s recognition conditional, the more difficult it is to maintain unity in the process.

#### **4. Europeanization of foreign policy: The case of Sweden**

This background of contested cooperation contrasts with a history of Europeanisation of Swedish foreign policy. There is considerable consensus in the academic literature that Swedish foreign policy has become Europeanized since it became an EU member state in 1995 (Brommesson 2016; Eriksson 2006; Miles 2000). The research points to the Europeanization of Swedish foreign policy along all three dimensions of adaptation, projection and cross-loading (Wong 2011). Important to note for the purposes of this paper, these processes of Europeanization have continued uninterrupted despite changes in the constellation of government parties (Brommesson and Ekengren 2013).

With EU membership, the organizational and working processes in Swedish foreign policy changed and adapted to the multi-governance system of the European Union (Ekengren 2009; Mörth 2016). New formal structures for coordination were created at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the Swedish parliament, a new committee for EU affairs was set up. Furthermore, several scholars point to a deeper form of Europeanization taking place, not just in terms of formal structures, but also with reference to norms and identities (Doeser 2008). According to Brommesson (2010), this ‘normative Europeanization’ represents a ‘radical change’ in the Swedish foreign policy role conception. It signifies a shift away from an exceptional internationalist role inspired by the ‘third-way’ ideas of Olof Palme (economic and social liberation of the Third World) towards a more explicitly liberal role conception emphasising individual human rights, market economy and free trade (Brommesson 2016: 529; Bergman Rosamond 2006). Another study by Eriksson (2006) finds that foreign policy problems and their solution were increasingly framed within a European framework. It is noticeable, for instance, that the socialist former foreign minister, Anna Lindh (1999), explicitly made reference to a Swedish foreign policy with a European identity and responsibility.

This European orientation became even stronger when Carl Bildt became foreign minister after the 2006 election (Bildt 2012; Bildt 2013). Bildt clearly anchored Swedish foreign policy in the EU framework of policy-making by emphasising common European approaches. He was a keen supporter of the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and had a good working relationship with the EU High Representative at the time, Catherine Ashton (interviews). Indicative of his commitment to the EU foreign policy was that he instructed the Swedish Foreign Ministry not to issue replicate press releases on issues where EEAS statement had already been made (Gromadzki 2015: 159).

During his term of office and particularly during the Swedish Presidency of the EU in the latter half of 2009, the Swedish government with Bildt as foreign minister worked very close with the then High Representative Javier Solana to achieve some movement in the Israeli-Palestinian

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<sup>3</sup> Council of Ministers, Seville, June 2002.

peace process to a time table that would ultimately lead to recognition and a two-state solution to the conflict. The Swedish government also took an important step to upgrade the Palestinian delegation in Stockholm to ambassadorial status. However, there was never any serious consideration of breaking branks with other EU member states on the issue of recognition (interview).

The Europeanization of Swedish foreign policy has not meant a lowering of the ambition to have a voice and seek to influence issues within EU foreign policy. On many issues, like for instance, the Eastern Partnership and policy towards Russia, Swedish politicians and diplomats have consistently sought to upload Swedish interests to multiply Sweden's voice in international affairs. As a relatively small state, Swedish foreign policy is by instinct multilateralist, yet this does not necessarily mean an embrace of supranational decision-making in EU foreign policy. At the end of the day, the Common Foreign and Security Policy is still seen as an intergovernmental platform for coordination (Gromadski et al 2015).

While the independent streak in Swedish foreign policy was lowered with EU membership, Sweden has continued to nurture its identity as an activist player and middle power able to punch above its weight. Swedish policy-makers take great pride in the fact that Sweden consistently is ranked high as 'leader' in the so-called 'Scorecards' of the influential think-tank, the European Council of Foreign Relations - in some years scoring nearly on par with the Big Three (<http://www.ecfr.eu/scorecard/2016/countries/sweden>). When asked why Sweden achieves such a high ranking in terms of influence, Swedish policy-makers point to four reasons why they are successful (interviews). Firstly, they suggest that Sweden has a well-developed strategy to EU foreign policy cooperation grounded in the fact that it is considered the most important political arena in Swedish foreign policy. This strategic orientation was reiterated by the Swedish foreign minister in the annual statement of government policy of 2016. Second, Swedish officials and politicians tend to work very closely together which reinforces a strong coherence to any position that Sweden takes on an issue. There should be no ambiguity of what Sweden wants to achieve. Thirdly, there is a careful honing of the skills and knowledge of a particular issue that Sweden seeks to pursue within EU foreign policy. It is important to project expertise of the topic and in order to exercise a kind of entrepreneurial leadership (Young 1991). Fourthly, great effort is put into preparing the 'ground' beforehand by networking and developing underhand contacts that facilitates coalition-building and the uploading of Swedish interests at the European level. An important part of this work, according to a senior Swedish diplomat, is to appear realistic about what can be achieved rather than taking an idealistic stand.

## **5. Sweden and the recognition of Palestine: leading the way or breaking away?**

In 2009 EU member states reiterated their readiness to recognise a Palestinian state, when appropriate. We are now ready to lead the way. In view of the difficult situation in the region and in light of the international law analysis, the government sees no reason to further delay a Swedish decision. We hope that this may show others the way forward (Margot Wallström, Minister for Foreign Affairs 2014)

Against a background of weak EU foreign policy practice on this issue and clear Europeanisation of Swedish foreign policy, Sweden's decision to recognise Palestine had a clear 'break away' flavour.

Sweden held national elections on 14 September 2014 that broke eight years of government by

the Alliance coalition of centre-right parties. As soon as a new government was formed, consisting of the Social Democratic Party and the Greens, the new prime minister Stefan Löfvén stated in the Government Declaration of 3 October 2014 that the Swedish government intended to recognise Palestine (Regeringskansliet Promemoria 2015). Shortly afterwards, a message of the new government's intention to recognise Palestine was circulated to all foreign missions. Much of the groundwork to initiate the formal process leading to a decision to recognise Palestine was therefore done before the new government assumed formal office (interview). As soon as Margot Wallström became the new foreign minister of Sweden, she immediately initiated and instructed her officials in the foreign ministry to start the formal process of preparing a decision of formal recognition in accordance with international law. The main task was given to the MENA unit in the Swedish foreign office that deals with the Middle East and North Africa as well as a group of international law experts. There was no effort to involve the EU unit or the European Correspondent at any stage of these preparations, which indicates the lack of any wider EU perspective (interviews).

Curiously, the formal decision to recognize Palestine as a sovereign state was declared by the foreign minister Wallström in a newspaper article published in one of the leading national newspapers on 30 October 2014 (*Dagens Nyheter*). Prior to that, the Swedish foreign minister had made a number of interventions and speeches that the decision was imminent. The foreign minister informed her colleagues in the European Union over an informal lunch just prior to a Foreign Affairs Council meeting on 20 October 2014 (Promemoria Regeringskansliet 2015) (interviews). While there was considerable surprise and also some sympathy with the Swedish decision to recognise in the European Union, the decision proved controversial in Swedish domestic politics. Especially the Liberal and Conservative parties were outspoken in their criticism that the process leading up to the formal decision had been hasty, unbalanced and badly handled as it was a unilateral decision that broke ranks with other EU member states (interview Ohlsson 2016). There were also reservations that the formal decision broke Swedish principles for diplomatic recognition according to international law, given that Palestine was not in full control over its territory (*Svenska Dagbladet*). The formal decision to recognize Palestine was therefore referred to the Parliamentary committee on constitutional affairs. At the end of the day, the government broke a tradition in Swedish foreign affairs that the formal recognition of new actors should be based on cross-party consensus.

It is therefore striking that the process leading up to a formal recognition of Palestine was a very national, even party-political one. As stated earlier, there was next to no consultation or attempt to coordinate this decision within the EU or with other EU member states. It is worth remembering that several countries, including Spain, France and the UK, witnessed lively debates on the issue of Palestinian recognition around this time. To announce the Swedish intention to recognise Palestine during an informal lunch just prior to a FAC meeting did not signal any intention by the Swedish government that it wished to Europeanize this important decision within the EU. The timetable had already been set long beforehand (interview). Hence, it could be argued that this unilateral decision to formally recognise Palestine broke the image of Sweden as a reliable partner in the CFSP that had been consistently nurtured since becoming member in 1995. In many ways, it was a return to the old national role conception that Sweden can play an exceptional role in global affairs (Brommesson 2016).

To examine why, when and how the Swedish government arrived at this decision to recognise Palestine, we have to analyse the motivation and justification that was given at the time. It is important to recall that the Swedish foreign minister assumed office with a clear ambition of an ethical foreign policy that included a new theme of feminism, a principled stance on human

rights (that would cause a low point in relations with Saudi Arabia) and a generally broader global approach to most issues with a renewed emphasis on the primacy of the United Nations (interview). It is within this discourse of moral righteousness that the decision to recognise Palestine was taken based on four key motives guiding the decision-making process.

First, there was a sense of urgency in taking the decision given that the vision of a two-state solution was seen to be quickly dissipating. There was a desire to “stir things up” to try to create a momentum in the stalled peace negotiations (interview). When defending the decision to recognise Palestine, Margot Wallström (2014) has repeatedly stated that her fear the decision rather came too late rather than too early. A second reason for recognition was the gaping power inequalities between the Israelis and Palestinians. The decision would at least from a formal point of view make the relationship between the parties a little less unequal. Wallström (2015) again reiterated in a number of speeches that this was not to be interpreted as Sweden taking any side in the conflict, though this was not how the Israeli government saw it. Israel withdrew its ambassador to Stockholm in protest the day after the decision was declared – the starting point of a sharp downturn in Swedish-Israeli diplomatic relations. A third major consideration for the decision and timing was ‘the land issue’, eg. the rapid expansion of Israeli settlements on the occupied territories by the Israeli government, that continuously ship away at the possibility of achieving a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The fourth reason was based on the belief that formal recognition would boost the leadership of moderate Palestinians and give hope to young people and prevent them from seeking more radical solutions to their problems. As Wallström (2016) exclaims, “Without hope, we risk dangerous desperation”. One finds here an implicit connection made to the radicalisation of politics and the potential threat this may present in the long term if the vision of a two-state solution is not kept alive. A final reason, rarely given in public, is also that there growing “anti-Muslim sentiments” throughout Europe and in Sweden itself may make a decision of this kind harder to make in the future if it was kept on the back-burner (interview).

While a total of 135 states around the world have now recognised Palestine as a state, very few countries in the Western world have done so, let alone within the EU and in Scandinavia.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore important to examine how the Swedish government justified this unilateral decision. For Sweden, the importance of international law is central to its worldview of an international society grounded on legitimate global governance structures (Bergman Rosamond 2006). The ruling by international law experts that Palestine qualified according to the central criteria for the recognition of sovereign statehood was therefore important. They found that there is a territory, population, and a government, although these criteria were all qualified with reference to the fact that negotiation of a final status of borders were still not achieved (Wallström 2014). The precedents of Swedish recognition of Croatia and Kosovo with similar qualifications justified the decision. When justifying the decision, Swedish diplomats also mention the fact that there have also been several international declarations that acknowledge the Palestinian capacity to govern. Particularly important here is the UN decision in 2012 to grant and upgrade Palestine to non-member observer state status (interviews). Worth recalling in this context is that this vote split the European Union members roughly into two halves: one half endorsing the decision and one half abstaining. This decision may have been informative to how the Swedish government later decided to sideline the EU in its decision to recognize Palestine.

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<sup>4</sup> Iceland is an exception and has recognised Palestine. Norway’s left party [NAME?] in opposition has indicated that if it were to return to government, it will recognise Palestine (interview). Denmark and Finland have upgraded the status of the Palestinian diplomatic representation in their capital to that of embassy, in line with the other Nordic countries. See: <http://um.dk/en/news/newsdisplaypage/?newsid=0d2ba8c4-d5a1-4503-80a9-7eaa1a72f019> last accessed on 13 / 6 / 2016.

When asked about how the unilateral decision was justified with reference to the EU, Swedish diplomats pointed to declarations made in the Foreign Affairs Council and the European Council from 2009 onwards that have repeatedly stated that the European Union is prepared to recognise Palestine, but that it is up to each individual member state to do so when considered appropriated. From the Swedish government perspective, the decision to unilaterally recognise Palestine was therefore not a case of breaking ranks but acting in accordance with previous agreements made within the EU.

To summarise, there are several important explanations why Sweden went out on a limb when it decided to recognize Palestine. To begin with, it underlines the importance to incorporate the domestic politics in any analysis of the Europeanization of foreign policy. The new government considered the formal recognition of Palestine as a highly symbolic issue for the left and a key marker that the new government wished to broaden the focus and change the normative orientation in Swedish foreign policy. With Carl Bildt at the head of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there was a general sense that the broader global agenda had lost out in the overly Europeanist focus on foreign affairs. To those Swedish diplomats who have traditionally worked on UN issues, this was a welcome re-orientation. Yet, at the same time, the haste at which the decision was prepared in the Swedish FMA meant that the traditionally cohesive and close relationship between Swedish politicians and diplomats took was unsettled. There was a general sense among several Swedish officials that the foreign minister made statements to the media with nuances that had not been grounded with them. For some diplomats who take pride in the norm of a close working relationship between officials and politicians, this gave the impression of an ill-prepared process that they did not feel represented the image of Sweden as a skilful diplomatic entrepreneur.

Secondly, the return of a role conception based on ‘nationalistic internationalism’ (Goldmann 1997) can also be explained by the continued problems of the European Union to take collective action on global issues despite the improvements to the foreign policy machinery after the Lisbon treaty reforms. Given Swedish past ambitions to upload its core interests at the European level, it is striking that this option was not seriously considered, or at least, conducted with more extensive discussion with EU partners given the impact it would have on a policy issue at the heart of EU foreign policy. While Catherine Ashton had kept a very low profile on the Middle East as a High Representative, Federica Moghereni signalled her ambition to be more active and was not over-joyed at the way in which she has been kept out of the loop in these discussions (interviews).

Finally, while the Swedish decision to break rank may be seen as deviant case given the steady process of Europeanization that has taken place over the last twenty years, the ‘pioneer character’ in Swedish foreign policy as a norm setter on international issues has a long pedigree in Swedish foreign policy. This “urge to act” (Zannakis 2013) and take a lead on international issues by way of example is not restricted to this particular case of recognising Palestine. We find it on many other issues, like in the politics on climate change politics and asylum. It is also worth remembering that on the specific issue of recognising Palestinian self-determination and statehood, it was the former Swedish prime minister, Olof Palme, who was one of the first western leaders to shake the hand of the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat in 1974. While criticized at the time, many social democrats think that this showed the way forward for many other leaders who followed suit later decades later (interview).

Leadership is ultimately a social relationship between leader and followers. To date, the

Swedish decision to recognize Palestine has not been followed by other EU member states, not even among its closest Scandinavian allies, as we are going to explore.

### **5. Other member states' responses: no takers for "not a major fact"**

The impact on EU foreign policy practices was to make the issue of Palestine's recognition a non-starter for discussion within the EU. The recognition by Sweden has become a non-conversation among member states, a black hole in their ongoing discussion, both within the "like-minded" camp of countries closer to the Palestinian position and with those identifying themselves with the arguments generally put forward by Israel. European partners took some distance from the path undertaken by Sweden, rather than being inspired to follow Sweden's example. Moreover, member states have not taken upon themselves to display solidarity with Sweden, when it came (especially the minister of Foreign Affairs) under severe criticism from Israel. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, recognition is considered a bilateral issue and, as Sweden has not aimed to frame it otherwise, by default member states do not interfere in bilateral relations between single member states and non-member states. Second, member states have noticed the strong reaction of Israel to Sweden's recognition and have started to look at the Swedish experience as a lesson in how *not* to handle this dossier.

The European discussion on the so-called Middle East Peace Process is so well established that, within an overall common European understanding based on the 2-states solution, it has its own calendar, issue-specific outputs and very clear sides to each argument. The Venice Declaration, issued in 1980, emerged from a process of convergence of member states' positions. It was followed by a string of further declarations, consolidating the right of the Palestinians to self-determination and, ultimately, to a (democratic and peaceful) state. Within this consensus, the pro-Israeli side has been taken by Germany and the Netherlands. However, with the 2004 enlargement, Central and Eastern European countries have largely also come to sit on this side of the debate, as most prominently seen in 2012 when the Czech Republic was the only EU member state to vote at the UN against granting Palestine non-member state status. The Berlusconi governments have also shifted Italy to this camp, a move maintained also by the (left-wing) Renzi government. Since the development of relations in connection to the discovery of gas in the East Mediterranean, Cyprus and Greece have also become vocal supporters of Israel in discussions on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Palestinian positions tend to find a more amicable reception amid the like-minded countries, which see Belgium, France, Ireland and Sweden in the lead and a number of other countries (including Finland and Slovenia) following suit.

The extent to which cooperation (and Europeanization) prevail over divergences depends on the state of relations with the area. The period 2008-2015 saw a convergence of member states, which produced a body of important declarations and semi-legislative acts. This consensus, which however terminated in 2016 (interviews), characterised the period during which Sweden recognised Palestine, which was also the time when most European countries hosted passionate debates in favour of recognising Palestine, in the wake of the 2014 Gaza war. Therefore, Sweden had a relatively favourable context within which it could have operated.

However, no solid and sustained contacts seem to have taken place, including with like-minded countries neither before, during or after the recognition. Belgium, for instance, could have been a journey companion, but nothing indicates that there were ouvertures aiming at a joint recognition (interviews). The debate in the MAMA Working Group, which routinely handles the Middle East Peace Process in its bi-weekly meetings, included an explanation of recognition by the Swedish representative on the day after the recognition occurred. This was presented at

the end of the meeting under AOB (i.e. ‘any other business’), which is where bilateral relations are usually considered. There was no further request of information, apart from an enquiry from the EEAS about the rationale (and, most likely, also the legal basis) of recognition.

Since recognising Palestine, Sweden has come under sustained and at times vitriolic criticism on the part of Israel. This took several forms, only some of them publicly visible, on top of recalling its ambassador after the recognition. Israel also refused not just to meet Wallström, but also to provide her with security protection for a private visit to Israel in occasion of a seminar in honour of Swede Raoul Wallenberg in Tel Aviv in January 2015, causing her to cancel the trip. Since then, Wallström has been *persona non grata* in Israel, as a consequence also of further criticisms she levelled against Israel.<sup>5</sup> Lower levels of the diplomatic hierarchy were also affected. For instance, Sweden faced difficulties when rotating diplomats in its Consulate General in Jerusalem [date?]. Relations have now improved and the bilateral political dialogue has currently (re-)reached the level of Heads of Divisions.

Sweden has not called on the other member states to show support for the consequences of recognition. This would have been an unusual move, in any case, even though not one without precedent. For instance, France recently asked to the EEAS to take up the issue of demolitions of *French* donated property in the West Bank with Israel (interviews). Sweden, on the contrary, has not voiced frustrations and not shared the full story of Israel’s retaliation with its partners (interviews). The only case in which there was a degree of solidarity (expressed by both targeted countries and by the rest in sympathy) occurred on the wake of the publication of labelling guidelines in November 2015. Israel singled out five member states for retaliation, including Sweden, and the five member states asked the EEAS and the other member states to clarify the issue with Israel, given that labelling guidelines were issued at the EU level and not at the bilateral one.

If anything, member states have looked at Sweden’s recognition and have found reason to ponder their next moves more carefully. In particular, small countries that are close to recognition have come to realise the need to do it in a different way (interviews).

Therefore, seen from the perspective of the other member states, there is nothing to indicate that Sweden wanted to lead on recognition or that it actually led. As an interviewee put it, “Sweden knew it would not get support for recognition and didn’t expect support for recognition.” This made it easier, especially for non-like-minded countries, to see Sweden’s recognition as “not a major fact.”

## **6. Conclusion: No Followers, No Leader and the End of Europeanization?**

The analysis has shown that Sweden’s recognition of the state of Palestine has put it at odds with its tradition of Europeanization in foreign policy, although it continues a long history of difficulties in coordinating recognition among member states. There has been probably no consistent attempt at coordinating with other member states, including in the like-minded group, thus justifying the widespread view among them that Sweden did it for domestic reasons. Moreover, the negative consequences have further exacerbated the context, creating a missed opportunity to debate the issue. If anything, member states have learned how *not* to recognise the state of Palestine.

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<sup>5</sup> Several references possible here. This article is quite comprehensive:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/13/israel-bars-swedish-foreign-minister-over-call-inquiry-palestinian-deaths>

To generalise from one instance is always risky. The decision of the Swedish government to unilaterally recognize Palestine, rather than to address it within the EU, clearly demonstrates the continued relevance of a deeply rooted national role conception. Yet, it is too early to say whether this represents the first signs of a re-nationalization of foreign policy. In the annual statement on foreign affairs, the Swedish government continues to stress that the European Union is Sweden's most important political arena. Sweden is an instinctive multilateralist – a small state with ambitions to play a role in global politics so this is logical. What is noticeable, however, is that in her recent speech at the Peace Conference on the Middle East in Paris on 3 June 2016, the foreign minister does not make one single reference to the role the EU can play in re-starting the Middle East peace negotiations (Wallström 2016).

Moreover, it is not only Sweden that has unilateral tendencies. It has not gone unnoticed that much of the French conference in Paris on 3 June 2016 has been organised by a previous EEAS official with very little engagement with the EU. The EU was represented by the HR/VP Mogherini, accompanied by just two other EEAS officials (the EU Special Envoy for the MEPP, Gentilini, and the Managing Director for the Middle East and North Africa, Westcott) (interviews). But very limited discussion about the conference has taken place within the EU, the main role of which seems to have come down to the report that Gentilini has been writing for the Quartet. A handful of member states were invited, both from the like-minded and the opposite group (Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK). Sweden could argue that its recognition of Palestine earned it a place in the group of leaders driving this initiative forward. The overarching trend across the EU seems to be that unilateral initiatives carry the day, at least when it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Could we be witnessing the end of Europeanization?

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