

Recognition of Palestine by Britain and France Raises Questions Over Substance

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France and the United Kingdom have announced plans to recognise the State of Palestine at the United Nations General Assembly in September, subject to various conditions. The decision, though seen by some as a significant diplomatic step, has been criticised by observers who argue it remains largely symbolic without accompanying practical measures.

French President Emmanuel Macron confirmed his government's intention in a letter to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, delivered on 24 July. The letter outlined France's recognition of Palestine as contingent on key demands from the Palestinian side. These include a formal condemnation of the 7 October 2023 attacks, the immediate release of Israeli hostages, the disarmament of Hamas, its withdrawal from Gaza's administration, and the

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer followed on 29 July, stating that the United Kingdom intends to recognise Palestinian statehood in September unless Israel agrees to a ceasefire and commits to a lasting peace process. The UK's stance was echoed in the 'New York Call', issued by 15 Western nations and led by France, expressing collective support for recognition.

Canada, under Prime Minister Mark Carney, has indicated it may support recognition if the Palestinian Authority meets specific conditions. These include internal political reforms, full demilitarisation, hostage releases, and formal recognition of Israel's right to security and peaceful existence.

Despite the coordinated announcements, legal experts and advocacy groups have questioned the practical impact of the measures. International law expert Insaf Rezagui, speaking to Middle East Eye, noted that France already maintains consular relations with Palestine, amounting to implicit recognition. She contended that without enforcement mechanisms such as sanctions, European recognition efforts fall short of meaningful pressure on Israel to alter its policies in Gaza and the West Bank.

Anne Tuillon, chair of the French Palestinian Solidarity Association, welcomed the diplomatic statements but warned they risk becoming symbolic without tangible actions. AFPS has called for the suspension of the European Union-Israel Association Agreement, an arms embargo, a ban on settlement goods, and sanctions on companies operating in the occupied territories. Although French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot has expressed support for limiting EU funds to Israeli settlements, France has not adopted such measures at the national level. Meanwhile, the country faces scrutiny over allegations it continues to sell arms to Israel.

In the UK, critics have voiced similar concerns. Prime Minister Starmer's announcement has been described as politically cautious and heavily conditioned. Some within the Labour Party questioned the timeline and clarity on key issues such as defined borders and

governance structures. London Mayor Sadiq Khan stated that recognition of Palestine should not be used as political leverage but rather seen as a matter of principle. Transport Minister Heidi Alexander emphasised the humanitarian impact, particularly the suffering of children in Gaza.

The Muslim Council of Britain acknowledged the recognition statement but described it as delayed and warned it was unlikely to result in substantial policy shifts, such as ending arms exports or military cooperation with Israel. Their comments followed revelations that Israeli military personnel had continued training at a leading UK defence academy during the ongoing conflict in Gaza, where thousands of civilian casualties have been reported.

There is growing concern among activists that symbolic recognition without policy changes will have little impact. Calls have intensified for Britain and its allies to pair recognition with actionable measures, including direct arms embargoes and withdrawal of military cooperation, to address what they see as the worsening humanitarian crisis.

To date, 147 member states of the United Nations have recognised Palestine. These include major global powers such as Russia, China, and India, along with several European nations, including Spain, Ireland, and Norway. According to the 1933 Montevideo Convention, a sovereign state must possess a permanent population, defined territory, effective governance, and the capacity to conduct foreign relations. Palestine meets some of these criteria, although disputed borders and fragmented governance, particularly the division between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, continue to complicate full recognition under international law.

The long-standing two-state solution, which envisions an independent Palestine alongside Israel, has lost momentum in recent years. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and many in the Israeli government firmly oppose Palestinian statehood, especially in the aftermath of Hamas' 2023 attacks. Netanyahu has criticised recognition efforts by France and the UK as harmful to peace negotiations and as "a reward for terrorism."

One of the most significant hurdles remains the United States' unwavering support for Israel at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). As a permanent member, the U.S. frequently blocks resolutions critical of Israel's actions, limiting the international community's ability to apply diplomatic pressure through the UNSC framework.

As France, Britain, and Canada tie recognition of Palestine to strict preconditions, the move has prompted scepticism. Without enforcement tools or a clear roadmap, critics argue that these announcements serve more as political signals than effective shifts in foreign policy, leaving the reality of Palestinian statehood unresolved.