

*Norway's leaders say recognizing
Palestine is a first step in the
push towards a two-state solution*

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A demonstrator waves a Palestinian flag in front of the Royal Palace after a march in support of Palestine following a flare-up of Israeli-Palestinian violence, in Oslo, Norway, on 11 May 2021 (Reuters)

Oslo, May 26 (RHC)-- Norway, alongside Ireland and Spain, recently announced its decision to formally recognise Palestinian statehood based on the pre-1967 borders, starting from Tuesday, the 28th.

Predictably, as the Palestinian Authority and Hamas welcomed this development, the Israeli government lashed out by quickly withdrawing its ambassadors from Oslo, Dublin and Madrid and summoning the Norwegian, Irish and Spanish representatives in Tel Aviv.

Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store explained that Norway's decision was "in support of moderate forces that are on a retreating front in a protracted and cruel conflict." He said the move is an investment in the "only solution" that can bring lasting peace in the Middle East – "two states living side by side in peace and security".

Analysts were not surprised by Norway's move, which comes 30 years after it hosted the Oslo Accords, the early 1990s peace agreements that ultimately failed. "The Norwegian population has over a long time been moving towards a more pro-Palestinian view. The political establishment has been more hesitant, not least because of its close ties to the U.S.," Bjorn Olav Utvik, a professor of Middle East studies at the University of Oslo, told Al Jazeera. "Since the outbreak of the current conflict, popular opinion has swung even further towards the Palestinian cause."

He cast the recognition as "an important symbolic move" and one that is easier to make than, for instance, "cutting off all investments linked to Israel by the Norwegian sovereign wealth fund." With European countries deeply divided by the Israeli war on Gaza, Norway has moved closer to those who vocally support Palestinian rights to self-determination and basic dignity.

"We can't wait any longer," Espen Barth Eide, Norway's foreign minister, recently told Al Jazeera. "The only viable long-term settlement which can bring peace to the Palestinian people and the Israeli people is a two-state solution. These two states, of course, must have logical territories. A lot will have to change."

Norwegian officials have maintained high levels of support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and have been quick to demand a ceasefire after the latest conflict erupted.

Previously, Norway has condemned the Israeli occupation before the International Court of Justice. It does not export weapons to Israel and has sanctioned some "extremist" settlers.

"Norway believes that Israeli settlement activity on occupied land is illegal under international law and hinders the peace process and is in firm belief of a two-state solution as the only durable solution," said Hasini Ransala Liyanage, a doctoral research fellow at the University of Oslo's political science department.

She described Norway as a "prominent mediator of multiple conflicts in the world" that has "always focused on peaceful solutions." Norwegian mediation is characterised by a willingness to provide long-term assistance, impartial facilitation of peace talks and close corporation with parties in conflict, she added.

Oslo's recognition of a Palestinian state also underlines its support for the Arab Peace Initiative, which calls for recognition of Israel's right to exist and normalisation of ties in exchange for its withdrawal from lands captured since 1967 and a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

"To me, it seems the announcement is designed to create attention for this initiative and contribute to diplomatic momentum to increase European support for the Arab peace plan," Sverke Runde Saxegaard, a doctoral researcher at the University of Oslo, told Al Jazeera.

"The government has been emphasising throughout the day that this is not in any way a sign of support for Hamas but a sign of support for forces and actors that seek a nonviolent solution to the conflict within both Israel and Palestine. To provide a glimmer of hope in a dark time, so to speak," he added.

Israel's latest and deadliest war on Gaza has killed almost 36,000 people, most of them women and children. Its campaign began after Hamas, the group that governs the Gaza Strip, launched an unprecedented incursion into southern Israel during which 1,139 people were killed and dozens captured.

Oslo's recognition of a Palestinian state may also bode well for Norway's image and reputation in the Global South. Liyanage said Oslo's "strong diplomatic move" signals support for people in the Middle East and Muslim world as well as citizens of Global South nations who suffer from violence and protracted conflicts.

Norway will "stand as a state that acts against war crimes [and] violations of international humanitarian law and a state that recognises another state's legitimate right to defend its citizens and borders".

Norwegian politicians have also acknowledged the risks of applying international law inconsistently and the message that sends to non-Western audiences.

"Doing and saying popular things rarely hurt a country's standing. And although I do not see this as the primary motivation here, the minister of foreign affairs has long been vocal about how Norway and the West cannot afford to be seen as hypocritical," Saxegaard said. "If the West wants the world to be outraged about Russia in Ukraine, it needs to be outraged about Israel in Gaza."

Noting how Arab governments welcomed Norway's recent move, Hugh Lovatt, a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, said the move "goes some small way to counter Global South perceptions of European double standards and blind support for Israel".

It seems as though Oslo has realised that the time has come to approach the Israel-Palestine issue in new ways and abandon failed approaches from previous decades.

Jorgen Jensehaugen, a senior researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo, said the prime minister has implied that he believes that since there is no peace process, waiting for one to start as the war rages on "is no longer a viable alternative".

Lovatt added: "This move by Norway in my opinion also symbolises the final demise of the Oslo peace process and the urgent need to elaborate a new post-Oslo peacemaking strategy which should involve concrete steps to challenge Israeli occupation and support Palestinian rights.

"The hope is that a strong endorsement of Palestinian self-determination can demonstrate to the Palestinian public that diplomacy can deliver results and provide a credible alternative to armed violence."

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