

# A EUROPEAN CALL FOR PALESTINIAN INDEPENDENCE

We, Europeans, Rightly Recognized Israel in 1948. Now It Is Time to Recognize Palestine in Order to Facilitate a Peaceful Settlement between Israel, the Palestinians, and the Arab States

*By Miguel Ángel Moratinos*

No other issue has been more discussed and negotiated by the international community than Palestine. The so-called “question of Palestine” has been an ongoing subject in the diplomacy of the last century. Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire and after the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement, Palestine was included as a priority issue in the international agenda. The British historian Margaret MacMillan in her history of the Paris Peace Conference *Peacemakers* recalls an anecdote related to Great Britain’s geopolitical appetite to control the Middle East and what the Prime Minister Lloyd George thought about Palestine. MacMillan describes how Arnold Toynbee, an advisor to the British delegation during the Paris conference in 1919, had to deliver some papers to the prime minister. To his delight, Lloyd George had forgotten his presence and had begun to think aloud: “Mesopotamia . . . yes . . . oil . . . irrigation . . . we must have Mesopotamia. Palestine . . . yes . . . the Holy Land . . . Zionism . . . we must have Palestine.” Lloyd George’s mutterings reflect how, all throughout history, this land has attracted the interest of many external powers to rule the Promised Land.

November 2017 marks three historic milestones related to Palestine. A century ago on November 2, Lord Balfour addressed the famous letter to Lord Rothschild; in it he expressed that “his Majesty’s government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the attainment of this object.” That letter was the beginning of what would be known as the *Nakba* or catastrophe for Arabs and Palestinians, and the origin of

the State of Israel. Since then the region has been beset by wars, conflicts, and crises, many of which are still ongoing today. The second anniversary on November 29 marks seventy years since the adoption of the General Assembly Resolution 181 in which the United Nations

▷ Spain’s Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos meets with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Amman, Oct. 11, 2010. *Majed Jaber/Reuters*



approved the partition plan of Palestine into two states. November 22 marks the third milestone fifty years after the approval of UN Security Council Resolution 242 that put an end to the Six-Day War and enshrined the principle of “land for peace.”

The three anniversaries symbolize the quagmire of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If we could now reengage in a serious and efficient diplomatic process, we could even imagine finding a final and just solution. If Security Council Resolution 242 is finally implemented, it could open the way to make the “two-state solution” a reality, thus resulting in a new historic milestone by which the Balfour Declaration could be celebrated by all parties once Israel is recognized on the same terms as Palestine. That should be Europe’s role.

The main European countries currently involved in trying to solve a crisis that had its origin in European hegemony and colonial expansion, Great Britain and France, were the two main colonial powers competing to control Palestine. After long and difficult negotiations, Great Britain secured the international mandate from the League of Nations. Though the decision to allocate Palestine to the British was secretly agreed in the Sykes-Picot treaty, it was formally recognized in the San Remo Conference in 1920. Nevertheless the truth was, as referred to in Jonathan Schneer’s book *The Balfour Declaration*, that Mark Sykes persuaded François Georges-Picot that neither Britain nor France should govern Palestine, but rather an international condominium. Palestine was not “a twice promised land,” as some wrote then, but rather thrice-promised: to the Arabs, to the Zionists, and to a prospective international consortium whose members were to be determined.

Unfortunately, Palestine hasn’t been a “promised land” for any of its people but a land of suffering. A century of conflicts, wars, violence, and unsettled disputes is proof of this sad reality. It is the unfortunate history of a prosperous territory and a wise and dignified people. From the beginning, Europe has been trying to facilitate the negotiation of a peaceful resolution to the conflict. After the Suez War involving France, Britain, and Israel against Egypt in 1956, the role of the European powers faded away.

One hundred years later, the time may have come to revive the European role toward a more active reengagement in the diplomatic process. It would be wise to recall in the latest chapters of this frustrating peace process Europe was not considered as one of the main third parties to facilitate a final settlement. Nevertheless, the paradox is that European foreign policy has always been inspired by and connected to the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

It was in the “Venice Declaration” in 1980 that European leaders, gathered in this Italian city, decided to declare their support to the right of self-determination of the Palestinian people, thirty years ahead of the United States and the UN Security Council resolutions.

## The Golden Years of the Peace Process

The consequences of the first war in Iraq in 1991 forced the international community to acknowledge the urgency of solving the Israeli-Arab conflict. Under the leadership of the first Bush Administration, the United States called for the convening of the Madrid Peace Conference in October 1991. The Madrid conference marked the end of a period of wars (the Suez crisis in 1956, the Six-Day War in 1967, and the Yom Kippur in 1973) and succeeded where more than fifty-two secret and formal peace plans had failed to achieve any progress. Madrid launched the beginning of the so-called “peace process” and its terms of reference were very clear: “land for peace,” which entailed Israel’s withdrawal from the occupied territories and that the Arab countries should sign peace agreements with Israel. Unfortunately Madrid did not bring the “olive branch of peace to the region.” It is true that it gave for the first time a genuine hope that peace was possible, even if Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir declared in the Spanish capital that we would have to wait at least ten years. At that time we thought that ten years was too much time to satisfy peace aspirations and put an end to the sufferings and grievances of so many people.

The Madrid conference was followed several months later by the signing of the first Oslo Agreement. The announced breakthrough in the secret negotiations channel was unanimously received as a golden gift for diplomacy, and the actors well deserved the Nobel Peace Prize.

Today, with the benefit of historical perspective, there can be no denying the sense of deep disappointment with the Oslo process. Nobody can deny the positive psychological impact achieved by this agreement through mutual recognition. That recognition, however, was asymmetrical and the “step-by-step” methodology of this process—which was probably the only approach possible at the time—proved to be insufficient with negative consequences for the cause of peace. There was no end goal; the final status issues that were identified didn’t include the recognition of a Palestinian state. President Yasser Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) recognized the State of Israel, but the Israeli government merely gave recognition to the PLO but not the State of Palestine.

Nevertheless, the process launched in Madrid and consolidated in Oslo initiated the “golden years” of the Israeli and Palestinian peace process. There was hope, enthusiasm, and trust among the parties. Even with some setbacks and disappointments, the process was progressing.

The assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995 was a strategic shock for the process. Trust between the two leaders, Arafat and Rabin, was high when the Israeli prime minister was killed. At that moment, the momentum that both leaders had provided disappeared. The call for early elections by Prime Minister

Simon Peres resulted in Benjamin Netanyahu's assumption of the premiership and a fundamentally different Israeli approach to the Palestinian question.

These were years of great difficulty in maintaining the legacy of Madrid and Oslo. It was also a period reflective of the positive impact of European diplomacy on the peace process. European efforts succeeded in keeping the process alive; the European Union appointed a Special Envoy, a position which I was honored to be the first to assume. As part of a collective European diplomatic effort, we convinced the main actors, in particular the United States, to uphold the past legacy of the peace process. Prime Minister Netanyahu's first term could be considered constructive. Israel signed the Hebron protocol and a Likud government accepted for the first time to divide Judea and Samaria, its holy land. At the end of his first term Netanyahu signed the Wye River Agreement which was the last positive development before the new election in Israel. The Labor party came back to power and Prime Minister Ehud Barak was received as the "hero" who could solve all tracks of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

History will judge with objectivity the reasons for the collective failure to reach a final agreement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet with some hindsight I remain convinced that the parties involved: Israel, the Palestinians, the United States, and the international community, missed a "great opportunity." The successive negative developments that followed the collapse of the Camp David Summit in July 2000 are well known: an unsuccessful attempt to reach a final agreement in Taba in Egypt, the victory of Ariel Sharon in the Israeli elections, the onset of the Second Intifada and the collapse of the twin towers in 2001. The golden days of the peace process came to an end and we entered a long and thwarted process without any serious negotiations.

International diplomacy tried its best in the following years, but the process stagnated. In 2002, the European Union under the Danish presidency, proposed the "Road Map for Peace." The EU joined in the establishment of the "Quartet" together with the Russian Federation, the United States and the United Nations, but nothing of real substance was negotiated. The last efforts of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert could be considered the final attempt to reach an agreed settlement. Political circumstances on both sides did not allow for reaching an agreement and since then, peace efforts have remained in a sort of limbo.

### **The Road to Peace**

Today, even with the current stagnation of the peace process, the EU could have one of the keys to relaunching the political negotiations: a European recognition of the Palestinian state. Instead of waiting for "Godot," that is to say the U.S. plan, Europeans should use their diplomatic instruments to revive the process. The best leverage that Europe can employ at this moment would be the formal recognition of the state

of Palestine. The approach should proceed on several tracks. The Arab Peace Initiative should be implemented with European support. This should proceed with the understanding that mutual recognition of Israel and Palestine by the whole international community should be the only game in town. If Israel and the United States recognize Palestine, the Arabs and the Islamic states will recognize Israel. Europe could be the mediator in this process, taking the lead to accelerate this solution. Already in May 1999 in the Berlin declaration, Europeans committed themselves to “recognize the Palestinian state . . . in due course.” The “due course” is now.

We should tell our Israeli friends that if there is no progress in the political negotiations during a reasonable period of time, the EU will declare its recognition of the Palestinian state. That would be a logical and legitimate approach, since it is a reflection of Europe’s commitment to uphold the “two-state solution,” and the imperative to preserving peace in the region.

It has been a dramatic and mistaken trap to accept the premise that the creation of a Palestinian state can only come about as the result of Israeli-Palestinian negotiation. We should ask ourselves how we reacted when we recognized the State of Israel. We should recall how Israel’s Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, on the night of May 14, 1948, announced the establishment of the State of Israel. Nobody asked him to consider negotiating its recognition with the Palestinians or the Arab states. We, Europeans, rightly recognized Israel and we did it in good conscience, aware of all consequences. Now the time has come to recognize Palestine in order to facilitate a peaceful settlement between Israel, the Palestinians, and the Arab states. Maybe with this commitment we could correct the intent of Sykes-Picot. Palestine will be not a territory controlled by France, Great Britain, or by an international consortium but by Palestinians and Israelis living in peace and prosperity.