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Sweden's Foreign Policy Realignment: Implications of Palestine's Recognition for Portugal's Foreign Policy

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In his inaugural speech on 3 October 2014, Sweden's new Prime-Minister, the Social-Democrat Stefan Löfven, surprised the international community by announcing that Stockholm would recognize Palestine as a sovereign state.¹ Also surprising was the expeditious manner in which the Swedish government transformed words into actions: having been in functions for just a month, Margot Wallström, the Foreign Affairs Minister, officially recognized the Palestinian state's sovereignty in a short *communiqué* on 30 October.²

The decision by Löfven's government clearly marks an external and internal rupture. From the external point of view, some EU member-states—the case of Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta, Poland and Romania—had already recognized the independent state of Palestine, although the decision was made before joining the Union. Sweden is therefore the first EU member-state to unilaterally recognize Palestine's sovereignty. Internally, the Swedish government's decision repre-

sents a clear rupture from the policy line by the country's previous liberal-conservative executive led by Frederik Reinfeldt. It is worth recalling that in October 2011, in a context of profound European division, Sweden was one of the few EU member-states to have voted against Palestine's admission to UNESCO as a full-fledged member. In a way, the recognition of the state of Palestine's sovereignty constitutes not an end in itself, but a means and an instrument in a wider diplomatic game. On the one hand, as already noted, Löfven is signaling a rupture with the former political cycle, both in a formal and substantial way, while on the other hand, and probably most importantly, Palestine's recognition represents a return to the traditional roots of Swedish social-democrat foreign policy.³ In an interview granted before the nation's legislative elections, Löfven complained about the passivity of Sweden's foreign policy in the former political cycle, and promised to be more active in the UN and on matters related to human rights.⁴

In fact, with the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Carl Bildt, Swedish foreign policy was often aligned with that of the US and mainly centered on matters related to the EU. In practice, Löfven and Wallström now promise to

1 "Statement of Government Policy" (*Prime Minister's Office* [Sweden], 8 October 2014), p. 19.

2 "Sweden recognises Palestine and increases aid" (*Ministry for Foreign Affairs* [Sweden], 30 October 2014).

* Published also in Portuguese: Paulo Gorjão, "O realinhamento da política externa da Suécia: implicações para Portugal do reconhecimento da Palestina" (*IPRIS Comentário*, No. 9, Novembro de 2014).

3 Ver Christian Christensen, "Sweden rebuffs the US on Palestine" (*Al Jazeera*, 8 October 2014).

4 Alistair Scrutton e Johan Sennero, "Sweden's Palestine statement signals start of weightier global role" (*Reuters*, 7 October 2014).



refocus Stockholm's diplomacy, dedicating greater attention to the international agenda and to a number of issues that are traditionally assessed within UN institutions: gender equality, disarmament, peace and security. Moreover, the perception of the UN's importance in the purview of Sweden's foreign policy is surely strengthened by Wallström's own personal experience—between 2010 and 2014, Wallström held the office of UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict.

Undoubtedly, Palestine's recognition clears the way for Sweden's aspiration of placing itself in what it deems to be its place in international politics. In other words, Stockholm seeks to regain the prestige and the position it once held in the UN's universe. At a time when Sweden has positioned itself as a candidate for a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council in the 2017/2018 biennium, Stockholm has not forgotten the humiliating defeat suffered in its bid to the Human Rights Council for the 2013/2015 period.⁵ Equally important, as in the past, Sweden intends to once again hold more and better positions within UN structures.

To what extent may this be of interest for Portuguese diplomacy?

Much has been said about Portugal with regard to the possible naming of either António Guterres or José Manuel Durão Barroso as UN Secretary-General. As the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Guterres finds himself surely better placed than Durão Barroso in a bid to succeed Ban Ki-moon, whose mandate ends on 31 December 2016. However, not every European state will roll out the red carpet for an uncontested run by Guterres. Sweden surely will not, in as much as it is committed to promote a bid by the Swedish diplomat Jan Kenneth Eliasson, who is the current Deputy Secretary-General of the UN.

Having said that, Sweden's recognition of the Palestinian state's sovereignty matters to Portugal for additional reasons. Stockholm's decision has inevitably placed pressure on the remaining EU member-states. In a first reaction to Sweden's decision, the Portuguese Foreign Affairs Minister, Rui Machete, considered that "for the time being it is too soon" for Portugal to recognize Palestinian sovereignty", adding that "we do not think that the negotiations process should be interrupted until solid outcomes are achieved".⁶ Machete's "soon" followed the US stance, which considered Palestine's recognition "premature".⁷ Nevertheless, the Minister's reference to the negotiations process is less understandable when considering that talks failed last April.

It is in this context of a stalemate in negotiations, with new decisions by the Israelis on settlements and a resumption of violence in Gaza, that the recent Swedish decision will be discussed at the next monthly meeting of the EU's Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 17 November. The diplomatic stance of Portugal seems very clear: there is in Lisbon a favorable environment towards the recognition of a sovereign Palestinian state. However, instead of a unilateral Swedish decision, with the associated political and diplomatic costs, Portuguese diplomacy prefers concerted actions, i.e. a recognition jointly enacted with European partners, namely with those that are a reference in this matter: France, Ireland, and Spain. In sum, while Portugal understands it has nothing to gain from a rupturing Swedish gesture, it does not regard negatively a collective gesture towards the recognition of Palestine's sovereignty.

To put it bluntly, the stalemate in negotiations has lasted for far too many decades. Naturally, no European state contests Israel's right to live in peace and security. Nevertheless, it is a fact that patience and confidence are running out, notably with the perception that Israeli Prime-Minister Benjamin "Netanyahu" prefers a permanent state of war to a difficult peace".⁸ In this context, the Swedish decision of recognizing Palestine is clearly the most significant setback suffered by Israel in years. A list of setbacks—which runs the risk of becoming a long one—shows that the wind is not blowing in Netanyahu and Israel's favor. The non-binding vote that took place on 14 October in the British Parliament, in which 274 MP's voted in favor of the recognition of Palestine (a meager 12 voted against),⁹ also illustrates the fact that patience with Israel is running out among other EU member-states.¹⁰

In practice, there is only one beneficiary of the *statu quo's* indefinite dragging along. With the political and diplomatic endorsement of the US and European states, Israel insists that the recognition of the sovereign state of Palestine has to be a product of negotiations. However, the truth is that there has always been a pretext, regardless of the level of its legitimacy, to provoke a rupture before reaching an understanding. In this regard, it is not only the Palestinians who are hostages to radicals in

5 With three openings available for five candidates, Germany, the US and Ireland left Greece and Sweden out of the race.

6 "Portugal considera ser cedo para reconhecer estado da Palestina" (*Diário de Notícias online*, 31 October 2014).

7 "Daily Press Briefing: Jen Psaki" (*U.S. Department of State*, 3 October 2014).

8 Ver Philip Stephens, "Israel is losing its friends in the world" (*Financial Times*, 17 October 2014), p. 9.

9 "MPs back Palestinian statehood alongside Israel" (*BBC News*, 14 October 2014).

10 Recently, 18 former French ambassadors appealed for the recognition of Palestine: "Urgence pour la Palestine" (*Le Figaro*, 17 October 2014); the Irish Senate approved on 22 October a non-binding motion appealing that the government would recognize the state of Palestine: "Irish senate calls for recognition of Palestinian state" (*AFP*, 23 October 2014); last, but not the least, Alon Liel, former general-director at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, wrote an article appealing for the EU member-states to follow the footsteps of Sweden: "EU states should follow Sweden on Palestine" (*EUobserver*, 23 October 2014).



Palestine and Israel. Indeed, the US and European states find themselves hostages to the political and diplomatic support that they have given to Israel.

Einstein observed that “insanity is doing the same thing, over and over again, but expecting different results”. Despite a series of failures in negotiations, European states insist in making the recognition of Palestinian sovereignty contingent on an agreement attained via negotiations. Following decades of stalemate, the absence of results is in the plain sight of everyone.

Therefore, it is only logical to seek to redress the balance, to change the existing equilibrium between carrots and sticks. Thus, there is no reason for not accepting as valid the Swedish argument that recognizing the Palestinian state contributes to making the parts “less unequal”. Adding to this, Stockholm’s thesis is equally reasonable, according to which its decision strengthens the political stance of Palestinian moderate forces.¹¹

Certainly, in regards to a subject that does not comprise a priority for Lisbon, Portuguese diplomatic prudence is perfectly understandable, even acceptable. What matters for Portugal is firstly to avoid being out of step with France, Ireland and Spain over the subject. Having said this, Lisbon could—and should—assume, both publicly and privately, a more assertive and active political and diplomatic stance in the defense of the recognition of Palestinian sovereignty, partly due to the reasons invoked by Sweden.

Considering this, the stance assumed by Rui Machete arises as excessively static and defensive. Being faced with Stockholm’s stance, Portugal should have reiterated that negotiations between Israel and Palestine need to be resumed as quickly as possible. Equally important, the

Portuguese Minister should have also said that the recognition of the state of Palestine will be made according to the pre-1967 borders, or as agreed by the two sides. Last, but not the least, Portugal should have made it clear that, under the indefinite continuation of the *statu quo*, even if that is not its preference, Portuguese diplomacy does not rule out the possibility of following in Sweden’s footsteps.

¹¹ “Sweden today decides to recognise the State of Palestine” [DN Debatt, 30 October 2014].

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