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Implications of Netanyahu's Reelection for Portugal: Time has come for the Recognition of the State of Palestine

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Benjamin Netanyahu was the big winner in Israel's parliamentary election. With nearly all the votes counted, Likud has secured 30 of the 120 Knesset seats, in what represents a comfortable (and surprising) victory over the Zionist Union of Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni.

Netanyahu now has to form a coalition government, which will most likely result in a sharp shift to the right, well in line with the electoral rhetoric. During the campaign, the prime-minister abandoned the commitment to negotiate the creation of a Palestinian state and promised to continue pursuing the policy of settlement expansion, hence worsening the current political clash with the United States and the European Union (EU).

Netanyahu's continuity as prime-minister—assuming he will be able to form the much needed coalition—coincides with Fernando Gentilini's appointment as the new EU Special Representative for the Middle East peace process.¹ Most importantly, Netanyahu's permanence in office will almost inevitably lead the U.S. and EU member-states to reevaluate diplomatic relations with Israel, and thereby with the Palestinian Authority.

Bearing in mind this process of political reevaluation, we can be sure that Portugal will not be an exception. In December 2014, the Portuguese Parliament approved a resolution—endorsed by the PS, PSD and CDS parties—

calling on the government to recognize, in coordination with the EU, the state of Palestine. At that time, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rui Machete, affirmed that the government was sensitive to Parliaments' appeals and that he would chose the most adequate moment to recognize the state of Palestine.

As I said when Sweden recognized the state of Palestine, "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".² It is exactly that inclination towards concerted actions that explains the reference in the parliamentary resolution with regard to the need for coordination with the EU.

I have also made it clear, therefore, that "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," as well as stating that "the stance assumed by Rui Machete (...) as excessively static and defensive".³

1 The Italian diplomat will also act as EU envoy to the Middle East Quartet, which comprises Russia, the UN, the U.S., and the EU. The Quartet is led by Tony Blair since 2007, but his continuity is at risk. See Alex Barker, Geoff Dyer and John Reed, "Blair poised to step back as envoy for Middle East peace Quartet" (*Financial Times*, 16 March 2015), pp. 1-2.

2 Paulo Gorjão, "Sweden's Foreign Policy Realignment: Implications of Palestine's Recognition for Portugal's Foreign Policy" (*IPRIS Viewpoints*, No. 160, November 2014), p. 2.

3 *Idem*, p. 3.



That said, in light of the recent results of the Israeli elections, and considering that Benjamin Netanyahu has abandoned his commitment to negotiate the creation of a Palestinian state, it is time for Portugal to forgo, if necessary, its preference for a concerted European move and unilaterally recognize the state of Palestine, in the very same way and terms as Stockholm has done.

Portugal has a window of opportunity that it should not miss. Given that the government is entering the last six months of its mandate, there are reasons of tactical nature

that argue for it to push ahead, hence assuming potential political costs and freeing the next executive from any eventual negative reactions. With a broad cross-party consensus—covering the most relevant political forces represented in Parliament— and regardless of whoever becomes the next prime-minister, such a decision will be simultaneously consensual and irreversible.

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