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**“With Friendly Concern”: The Turbulent Relations between Israel and Sweden**

*On 30 October 2014, Sweden recognised the state of Palestine. This chapter analyses the reasons for this policy decision, how this has impacted upon relations with Israel, and whether or not this recognition has lead to any positive change for peace. Sweden has since the early 1970's advocated for the Palestinian right to self-determination in the context of a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This chapter argues that recognition is thus simultaneously consistent and divergent with previous policy. The decision was intended to advance a peaceful solution to the conflict by trying to level the asymmetry between the two parties, and was based on principles of international law and human rights which have long guided Swedish foreign policy. Recognition has had little tangible positive effect on the peace process, but it has sharpened a long-held feeling in Israel that Sweden is pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli. However, the decision was not at all anti-Israel, as some have suggested, but has been seized upon by a number of Israeli actors for their own political purposes. Regrettably, anti-Semitism continues to exist in Sweden, but mainly among the far-right, and must not be conflated with government policy.*

According to an Israeli official, Swedish-Israeli relations have reached their lowest ebb.[[1]](#endnote-1) When situated in its historical context, the severity of this state of affairs becomes clear; the two countries have historically experienced a number of flashpoints and sharp disagreements over Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories and conduct towards Palestinians. These have centred around the observance and respect for international law and human rights law, and the proliferation of illegal Israeli settlements. Sweden has always insisted that any criticism of Israeli policies is a case of a friend telling difficult truths with their best interests at heart. Indeed, Sweden’s active foreign policy during the Cold War, including towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, earned it a reputation as “the world’s leading exporter of unsolicited advice”.[[2]](#endnote-2) Both the advice and the sentiment are increasingly falling on deaf ears in Israel, where Sweden is widely perceived as the least friendly country in Europe and accused by some of being anti-Semitic.[[3]](#endnote-3) These accusations are not limited to the Israeli public at large but also include government ministers, such as Israel’s current Minister of Defence, Avigdor Lieberman.[[4]](#endnote-4)

This acrimony has reached a new level under the Social Democratic government of Prime Minister Stefan Löfven. The main policy catalyst of this deterioration was the decision to recognise the state of Palestine on 30 October, 2014. This chapter will analyse the reasons for this decision within the historical context of Swedish relations with Israel, the Palestinians, and the moribund peace process, arguing that it is simultaneously consistent and divergent with previous policy. While support for a two-state solution has been consistent, policy to help achieve this outcome has changed across governments. In addition to reflecting on broader trends, it will analyse the impact of this policy on relations with Israel in recent years, and what effect these have had on the chances of achieving peace. It will argue that the decision was not at all anti-Israeli, as some have suggested, but has been misinterpreted and seized upon by a number of Israeli actors for their own political purposes. It is important and necessary to look beyond this characteristic type of zero-sum thinking. The decision was intended to advance a two-state solution by trying to level the asymmetry between the two parties, and was based on principles of solidarity, human rights, and international law which have long guided the Swedish Social Democratic Party’s foreign policy.

**An Evolving Relationship**

Since its foundation in 1948, Israeli relations with Sweden have evolved considerably. It is a complex relationship which has vacillated between a focus on shared values and an emphasis on differences. This tension was evident from the very beginning. Count Folke Bernadotte, a Swedish royal, assumed the difficult role of UN mediator for Palestine. Convinced that Bernadotte’s thinking about the future of the territory was inimical to their interests, members of the paramilitary organisation Lehi assassinated him in West Jerusalem on 17 September, 1948.

Although this soured relations between the two countries for many years, the bond between the Israeli and Swedish Labour parties who dominated domestic politics in each country was strong enough to overcome this act of terrorism. In the shadow of the Holocaust, Israel was seen in Sweden as a refuge for the persecuted Jews of the world, with little consideration of the consequences of the 1948 war for Palestinians. Social Democrats saw Israel as a type of utopia where the *kibbutz* embodied the spirit of socialist ideals of equality and solidarity.[[5]](#endnote-5) However, the continued occupation following the Six Day War of 1967 changed this for many Social Democrats, chief among them Prime Minister Olof Palme. The Palestinians were increasingly recognised as a people who deserved to exercise their national rights, including self-determination, which became officially articulated by the Swedish government in November 1974. Palme saw this as the most “logical” and equitable way to resolve the ongoing conflict, “based on demands not only for justice, but also realism”.[[6]](#endnote-6) The two-state solution thus became Swedish policy and has been continued by all successive governments regardless of the ruling party.

As one of the first European states to advocate for Palestinian independence and dialogue with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), this severely tested relations with Israel. Prime Minister Golda Meir argued that their longstanding friends in Europe had deserted them in favour of a terrorist group, cowed by the Arab oil weapon, while others have characterised Palme as “an Israel-hater of purest Social Democratic vintage”.[[7]](#endnote-7) Both of these views misrepresent Palme and the sources of Swedish policy. The change in thinking about the Palestinians was precipitated by a Social Democratic Party trip to Israel in late January 1970 to meet with their Labour colleagues. The confidential summary reported, “A growing opposition to the government line is demanding that the national identity of the Palestinian Arabs is acknowledged”, which was considered “a new positive line in the political debate in Israel”.[[8]](#endnote-8) Not only did the beginning of this change pre-empt the oil embargo, it was entirely consistent with broader Swedish foreign policy (known as “active neutrality”) which focused on de-colonisation and national liberation, democracy, and respect for international law and human rights.[[9]](#endnote-9) Perpetuation of the occupation was seen as a violation of international law, a threat to Israel’s long-term security as a source of continued conflict, and a threat to Israeli democracy due to the corrosion of liberal democratic values and the denial of rights to Palestinians.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Sweden continued to develop a strong relationship with the PLO, and sought to enable negotiations between them and Israel. Convinced that the road to Jerusalem went through Washington, Foreign Minister Sten Andersson crafted a role as a mediator between the PLO and the USA, which led to an opening of relations between the two in December 1988. This did nothing to improve official Swedish relations with Israel. However, Labour politicians and peaceniks like Yossi Beilin, Shimon Peres, and his advisor Nimrod Novik, still trusted Sweden and thought that their relationship with the PLO made them a useful intermediary. Swedish officials communicated Israeli messages and possible areas of concessions to the PLO in an attempt to develop the 1989 Shamir Plan, though nothing came of it.[[11]](#endnote-11)

After the Oslo breakthrough, Sweden supported the peace process with substantial aid to the Palestinians and sponsored Track II talks between Israeli and Palestinian academics designed to draw up the framework of a permanent status agreement dealing with the difficult issues of borders, security, refugees, and Jerusalem. Sponsored by Beilin and Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), these talks created the first important benchmark for future final status negotiations at Camp David in 2000 and beyond.[[12]](#endnote-12) Swedish mediation efforts continued under the new Social Democratic Prime Minister Göran Persson, premised on a better relationship with Israel. Persson thought Sweden had been far too close to Arafat and the Palestinians, and while figures like Abu Mazen thought this effort to build trust with the Israelis was potentially very positive for talks, the way the policy reconfiguration was handled, squandered a great deal of political capital that had been built up with the Palestinians.[[13]](#endnote-13)

As negotiations receded during the second *intifada* and were then monopolised by the US when they did happen, there was a continued Swedish focus on aid to support Palestinian state-building, institutional development, and capacity building. This was in line with EU policy, which became an increasingly prominent forum for Swedish advocacy for a two-state solution. During the leadership of Conservative Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, Foreign Minister Carl Bildt worked within the EU to articulate a common policy on certain key issues, particularly when Sweden held the presidency of the EU in 2009. Bildt spearheaded a joint statement of EU foreign ministers that for the first time articulated the need for Jerusalem to be the shared capital of two states. A leaked draft specifically mentioned East Jerusalem as the capital of the state of Palestine, but this initial Swedish formulation was softened due to a lack of consensus among member states and Israeli diplomatic pressure.[[14]](#endnote-14) Nonetheless, this move was condemned by Israel as pre-judging the outcome of negotiations between the two parties on the issue.[[15]](#endnote-15) However, from a Swedish and an EU perspective, this was a necessary response to decades of unilateral Israeli action to alter the demography of the city, and settlement construction around East Jerusalem designed to disconnect it from the rest of the occupied Palestinian territories.[[16]](#endnote-16)

This was one of many differences between the two countries during this period. Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman railed against Bildt for refusing to condemn an article in Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet* which claimed that Israeli soldiers had harvested the organs of Palestinians they had killed. Bildt insisted that it was not the role of the government to interfere with freedom of the press, regardless of his personal views on the story.[[17]](#endnote-17) In the midst of this disagreement, Bildt cancelled an upcoming visit to Israel. Relations further soured when Bildt endorsed the UN sponsored Goldstone report into Israeli Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip, which accused Israel of war crimes. An Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman sarcastically suggested that this position demonstrated Bildt’s “lack of reading comprehension skills”.[[18]](#endnote-18) A 2011 op-ed in *The Jerusalem Post* reflected on years of Bildt’s positions on Israel and came to the conclusion thatBildt was a “seemingly cerebral statesman”, but his “behavior seems to be telling of a deep passion which is either motivated by unbridled love for the Palestinians and their cause or by deep resentment of Israel.”[[19]](#endnote-19) Analysis of the Swedish debate surrounding the recognition of Palestine, however, shows just how erroneous this assessment is.

**To Recognise or Not to Recognise?**

In the wake of the Obama administration’s failed peace efforts in 2011, the Palestinians embarked upon a campaign for international recognition of statehood at the UN.[[20]](#endnote-20) This initiative generated significant foreign policy debate in Sweden about how the country should respond.

While Bildt was not averse to Sweden and the EU trying to endorse and enshrine certain elements of a two-state solution, like a shared capital in Jerusalem, he thought recognising Palestinian statehood was premature. In a parliamentary foreign policy debate on 15 February, 2012, Bildt explained his reasoning. Control of territory was, he argued, a basic criteria which the Palestinians could not fulfill as Israel was the ultimate power in the occupied territories. He warned that one should not ignore the reality of the occupation and think that the Palestinians actually exercised sovereignty. Palestinian officials could be democratically elected one day and arrested by Israel the next. While he hoped that circumstances would change to allow recognition, policy could not ignore this “frustrating” reality. Sweden would continue to work for a “strong and unified European policy” towards the conflict, building on the example of the 2009 statement.[[21]](#endnote-21)

The opposition coalition composed of the Social Democrats, the Greens, and the Leftists argued differently, as did one member of the ruling coalition, the Centre party. In an op-ed to the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* [[22]](#endnote-22)published that day to coincide with the debate, the opposition leaders argued that to follow the government’s logic was to put all the power in the hands of the Israeli occupiers. In their view, the three main international legal criteria for statehood (borders, a permanent population, and government) were in fact met, with UN and World Bank officials acknowledging that, in a number of areas, Palestinian institutions were ‘ready to assume the responsibilities of statehood.’[[23]](#endnote-23)

Short of statehood, Sweden voted in favour of according Palestine non-member observer status in the UN General Assembly. It also accorded Palestinian representatives in Stockholm the diplomatic rights and duties mandated by the Vienna Convention on diplomatic relations.[[24]](#endnote-24) The opposition took that opportunity to continue to push for recognition, but their motion was defeated by 179 votes to 140.[[25]](#endnote-25) In the run-up to the 2014 general election, a commitment to recognise Palestine was included in the opposition party election manifestos. Upon winning the election, this commitment was included in Prime Minister Löfven’s government declaration and eventually enacted on 30 October, 2014.

In Foreign Minister Margot Wallström’s explanation of the government’s decision, she repeated and reinforced the argument that had been made since 2012. She stressed the need to support moderate Palestinian political parties (in other words, the deeply unpopular Mahmoud Abbas and Fatah), and prevent violence and extremism by giving some hope of a better future to the younger generation. The campaign for recognition was part of this, and the Social Democrats were ready to support this Palestinian initiative. While she acknowledged that the Palestinians did not exercise full control over the West Bank and Gaza, she pointed to the recognition of Croatia in 1992 and Kosovo in 2008, where those nationalist groups were not in full control either. She argued that Palestine too should be a special case, considering the historic longevity and trajectory of the conflict.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Recognition was in many ways an effort to keep the dwindling prospect of a two-state solution alive, which was being actively threatened by Israeli settlement expansion: “there are those who will argue that today’s decision is premature. If anything, I fear it is too late”.[[27]](#endnote-27) For all Swedish governments, the two-state solution has been the cornerstone of policy towards the conflict, but this constituted a different approach to achieve it. Whereas Palestinian statehood had been seen as an outcome of negotiations, the failure of these led to the subversion of the old logic. Recognition would serve to balance the asymmetry between the parties, enable negotiations between two states rather than an occupier and the occupied, and provide a clearer guarantee of the endgame of negotiations. It was not designed to supplant bilateral negotiations between the two parties, but to support this process.[[28]](#endnote-28)

The decision was hotly criticised and debated by the opposition parties. The Conservative, Liberal, and Christian Democrat parties questioned the “moderate” and democratic nature of the Palestinian Authority, pointing to incitement to violence against Israel, praise for terrorists, and violations of Palestinian human rights.[[29]](#endnote-29) In a similar vein, the far-right populist Sweden Democrats argued that recognition was tantamount to recognising Hamas, who had announced their intention to form a unity government with Fatah, and also denounced the Palestinian Authority’s support for and payments to terrorists and their families, calling for an end to Swedish aid to the Palestinians.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Unsurprisingly, much of this echoed the criticism that emanated from Israel. Israeli officials claimed that the decision was abrupt and that it took them by surprise, although this seems odd given how long the issue had been raised in parliamentary debates and election manifestos.[[31]](#endnote-31) The real objections were about substance rather than process. To many Israelis, this was tantamount to Sweden once again siding with the enemy who remained committed to their destruction. Meaningful statehood could only be achieved through a negotiated agreement and was conditional on a number of major concessions, such as abandoning the right of return, recognising Israel as a Jewish state, and accepting practical limits on sovereignty in deference to Israeli security concerns. Israel argued that recognition would in fact only make peace harder to achieve; it would embolden the Palestinians, make them less likely to return to the negotiating table, and encourage intransigence once there as they waited for the international community to impose a more favourable agreement on Israel. Before being recalled home for a month, the Israeli ambassador to Sweden Isaac Bachman also commented that the decision would encourage terrorism.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Israeli officials wanted to send a clear signal to other countries contemplating the same decision, and so Sweden was, to use the words of one Israeli official, “singled out for special treatment”.[[33]](#endnote-33) Lieberman even claimed that they were considering downgrading diplomatic relations with Sweden, although this was never done.[[34]](#endnote-34) Nonetheless, in the realm of public diplomacy this development was treated very seriously as a setback to the Israeli narrative about the conflict and the nature of any future peace. It is interesting to note that similar steps were not taken when a number of Latin American countries recognised Palestine in 2010 and 2011. The significance of being an EU member state with the ability to influence broader EU policy made the Swedish decision a more pressing concern, and there was fear that other EU countries might follow suit.[[35]](#endnote-35)

**Diagnosing Anti-Semitism**

In the aftermath of Swedish recognition, relations with Israel continued to deteriorate. While there was an underlying continuity between Foreign Ministers Bildt and Wallström despite their differences on recognition, there was a marked difference in their public engagement on the conflict. Wallström continued the Swedish tradition of being outspoken on the subject, specifically about Israeli actions against Palestinians, which caused further tensions.

Following the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) affiliated terrorist attack in Paris in November 2015, Wallström mentioned the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in response to a question about radicalisation:

Clearly we have a reason to be worried not only here in Sweden but around the world because there are so many who are being radicalised. Here again, you come back to situations like that in the Middle East where not least the Palestinians see that there isn't any future for us. We [the Palestinians] either have to accept a desperate situation or resort to violence.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry referred to these comments as “appallingly impudent” and “shockingly hostile”, suggesting that a direct connection was made between the conflict and the attack.[[36]](#endnote-36) In December 2015, in the midst of the wave of Palestinian knife attacks against Israelis, Wallström referred to the killing of Palestinian attackers and terrorists as “extrajudicial executions” and in January 2016 went on to call for Israel to investigate these incidents. Prime Minister Netanyahu condemned the “scandalous” statement, while Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely claimed that Sweden was encouraging terrorism and ISIS specifically. She also took it upon herself to bar official visits from Swedish government representatives, although this was later clarified to only apply to Wallström and her aides.[[37]](#endnote-37)

These comments, however, are hardly as outrageous as Israeli officials claimed. As Wallström’s press secretary explained, any suggestion that there was a causative link made between Israeli behaviour in the occupied territories and the attack in Paris is quite simply false and constitutes a deliberate misinterpretation.[[38]](#endnote-38) It was a broader statement about how hopelessness breeds radicalisation, which is hardly a ground-breaking observation. The issue of extrajudicial executions, while more controversial, was a concern grounded in international humanitarian and human rights law, specifically the principles of proportionality, the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, and the legal use of force.[[39]](#endnote-39) The same concerns have been raised for decades by Israeli and international human rights organisations in reaction to IDF soldiers’ killing of Palestinians, in addition to criticising the impartiality and thoroughness of internal Israeli investigations into these cases.[[40]](#endnote-40) This issue prominently came to the fore in March 2016 when footage emerged of Sgt. Elor Azaria executing a wounded Palestinian assailant in Hebron. [[41]](#endnote-41) The trial raised difficult questions about the legal use of force by Israeli soldiers and the need for judicial accountability in such cases. After Azaria was convicted of manslaughter, Netanyahu and many other Israeli politicians on both sides of the spectrum (although more prominently on the right) called for him to receive a presidential pardon.[[42]](#endnote-42) With multiple Israeli politicians and religious leaders calling for a “shoot-to-kill” policy irrespective of whether lethal force is necessary to protect life, the issue remains controversial.[[43]](#endnote-43)

The rift was further deepened by Sweden’s decision on 2 May, 2017 to vote in favour of a UNESCO resolution called “Occupied Palestine”, which Israel argued denied Jewish ties to Jerusalem and failed to recognise Israeli sovereignty in the city.[[44]](#endnote-44) While the resolution certainly lacked diplomatic finesse, the Swedish Foreign Ministry explained that they considered it factually accurate. The resolution referred to Israel as an occupying power in East Jerusalem and did not recognise its annexation of Jerusalem, positions consistent with international law. Terminologically, the resolution identified the Old City of Jerusalem and its walls as important to the three monotheistic religions, without naming any of them individually, and referred to “The two Palestinian sites of Al-Haram Al-Ibrahimi/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Al-Khalil/Hebron and the Bilal Ibn Rabah Mosque/Rachel’s Tomb in Bethlehem”, specifying that “the two sites are of religious significance for Judaism, Christianity and Islam”. This language appears egalitarian and seeks to acknowledge their shared importance, while identifying their geographic location in the occupied territories.[[45]](#endnote-45)

Sweden was the only EU member state who voted for the resolution, with France, Slovenia, and Spain abstaining, and others voting against. Foreign Minister Wallström explained to parliament that they had hoped for EU unity on the matter, but when it became clear that this was not possible with a mixture of abstention and votes against, Sweden was satisfied with the resolution and happy to diverge from others. In their negotiations with the Jordanians and Palestinians about the resolution, the EU had requested a number of changes to it. Wallström argued that when these were met, there was no reason not to vote in favour of it, and to do so would lead to reputational damage. Without mentioning Israel directly, she also suggested that lobbying had likely affected the votes of other member states.[[46]](#endnote-46)

This was seemingly also the case in the 2016 voting on more controversial UNESCO resolutions. Then, Sweden, France, Slovenia, and Spain had initially voted in favour of a resolution in April which did not use egalitarian language to describe al-Haram al-Sharif. When the vote was queried in parliament, Wallström explained that the language had previously been used in UN Security Council resolutions, that Sweden and the EU normally use both terms, that there was no consensus within the EU on the resolution, and that this vote was in no way meant to diminish Jewish claims to the site. She conceded that “it could definitely have been handled better”.[[47]](#endnote-47) When the issue came up again in the October meeting of the UNESCO Executive Board, Sweden and the others who voted for it abstained instead.[[48]](#endnote-48) Elliott Abrams of the Council for Foreign Relations attributes this to successful Israeli lobbying, and notes that the Israelis would not have expected a Swedish abstention.[[49]](#endnote-49)

While the UNESCO voting laid bare inconsistencies in the Swedish position and confusion about EU attitudes, Israeli reactions in each instance are also noteworthy. The 2017 vote led to the Swedish ambassador to Israel being summoned by the Israeli Foreign Ministry for rebuke whereas the April 2016 vote did not, despite being more controversial due to the exclusive language used on holy sites. As Wallström argued, the 2017 resolution was a vast improvement on previous UNESCO resolutions. Moreover, Sweden was the only country subject to this reprimand, when Brazil, China, and Russia also voted in favour.[[50]](#endnote-50)

The prevailing pattern across these disagreements points to a difference in emphasis and application of principles of international law. However, a number of Israeli politicians and media outlets have accused Sweden generally, Löfven’s Social Democratic government specifically, and Wallström individually of being anti-Semitic.[[51]](#endnote-51) This is a dangerous and false accusation, as the tendency to conflate criticism of Israeli policy with anti-Semitism obscures the serious continuing problem of genuine anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is, according to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) founded in Stockholm in 1998, “a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism [*sic*] are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities”. The definition goes on to cite a number of additional features of anti-Semitism, including, “Applying double standards by requiring of it [Israel] a behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation”, but also makes clear that “criticism of Israel similar to that levelled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic [*sic*]”.[[52]](#endnote-52)

Although the distinction between criticising democratic and non-democratic states is a very important qualifier, this extended IHRA definition on double-standards is problematic. While it positions criticism of Israel within a wider context, it simultaneously ignores other relevant contextual factors, such as the occupation. Other democratic states have not militarily occupied territory acquired by force for over 50 years, fought an ongoing conflict over that territory, and been the subject of multiple UN Security Council resolutions to withdraw from that territory or cease illegal practices there.

For decades, Sweden has been at pains to emphasise to Israel that its criticism of the occupation and the policies connected to it, and its support for a Palestinian state, are motivated by a genuine concern for the future of Israel as a Jewish, democratic state which respects human rights.[[53]](#endnote-53) While critics such as Franzman argue that Swedish criticism of Israel is disproportionate to that directed towards other states, this claim is dubious. As part of Sweden’s feminist foreign policy, Wallström has spoken out about human rights issues in many countries, notably causing a diplomatic rift with Saudi Arabia over what she described as the “medieval” flogging sentence handed down to dissident blogger Raif Badawi. She has also condemned Vladimir Putin’s “reign of terror” in Russia following the murder of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, and criticised war crimes committed in Syria and potential war crimes in eastern Ukraine.[[54]](#endnote-54) Wallström and the government also criticise Palestinian human rights failings and the significant authoritarianism of the Palestinian Authority, although these statements are not as well-publicised and tend to take place within bilateral dialogue.[[55]](#endnote-55)

It is true that anti-Semitism exists in Sweden. However, it is not primarily within the ruling government nor is it what motivates policy. Prime Minister Löfven became the first sitting Prime Minister to speak at the synagogue in Malmö on Holocaust Memorial Day in 2016:

The Holocaust may be history, but the persecution of Jews is happening here and now. Here in Europe, here in Sweden, here in Malmö, we see anti-Semitic attacks against synagogues, against rabbis, against women, men, and children. Disgusting acts of violence, taunting, conspiracy theories, prejudices and threats. The terrible seriousness of this is underscored by the bloody terrorist attacks across the world directed against Jews and Jewish communities. (…) It is shameful. It is shameful for the whole of Swedish society. It is a disgrace that we all have to acknowledge and rid ourselves of.[[56]](#endnote-56)

A Green party MP, Mehmet Kaplan, was forced to resign in 2016 after a succession of scandals, including when old footage emerged of him comparing Israel’s behaviour towards Palestinians in the occupied territories to Nazi Germany’s behaviour towards Jews. Two other Green party MPs had also previously been dismissed for similar statements, and the party appears to have credibly tried to address this issue, unlike the Sweden Democrats.[[57]](#endnote-57) Prominent Sweden Democrat MPs have publicly invoked anti-Semitic tropes about Jewish control of the media, while others have been recorded telling violent, anti-Semitic jokes among friends to rapturous laughter.[[58]](#endnote-58) While the deputy leader of the party, Anna Hagwall, was dismissed in 2016, many other party representatives who have made anti-Semitic statements remained in post.[[59]](#endnote-59) Simultaneously, they deny accusations of anti-Semitism by claiming to be protecting Jews from “evil Muslims”, another group the party purports to defend Sweden against.[[60]](#endnote-60) In parliamentary debates about foreign policy and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Sweden Democrats regularly condemn Hamas and the Palestinians but rarely criticise Israeli human rights violations.

This fits into a broader trend across European populist far-right parties identified and characterized by Brubaker as championing “civilisationism”, which is “a paradoxical combination of ‘identitarian’ Christianity, secularism, philo-Semitism, Islamophobia, and even some elements of liberalism….” Channeling Samuel Huntington’s concept of a “clash of civilisations”, a shared Judeo-Christian cultural identity which considers Islam a threatening enemy means that Israel is viewed, to quote Geert Wilders of the Dutch Party for Freedom, as “the West’s first line of defence against Islam”.[[61]](#endnote-61) Although they diverge from traditional far-right anti-Semitism in this regard, anti-Semitic behavior, language, and tropes nonetheless continue to feature in far-right parties in Austria, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, Sweden, and elsewhere.[[62]](#endnote-62)

Other more extreme, violent, outright neo-Nazi groups like the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) have also gained prominence in Sweden. The group was even allowed to set up a stall in the final days of the 2017 annual summer political debate week at Almedalen in Gotland. Their presence was countered and far outnumbered by hundreds of protestors, joined by many MPs, calling “for diversity, for love, for human rights”.[[63]](#endnote-63) Politicians from across the spectrum, including Foreign Minister Wallström, have spoken out clearly against such groups and said that they should not be given a platform at such events.[[64]](#endnote-64) Sweden Democrat leader Jimmy Åkesson has similarly tried to distance himself and his party from the movement, describing them as “dangerous people” whose record of violence should bar them from participation at Almedalen, but who he insists simultaneously need to be allowed a voice in a democracy.[[65]](#endnote-65) Later in the year, on the eve of Yom Kippur (30 September), hundreds of NRM members marched in Gothenburg and planned on passing the city’s synagogue, although police prevented this and altered their route. In clashes between protestors, police, and counter-protestors, 50 people were arrested.[[66]](#endnote-66)

Swedish officials argue that right-wing Israeli politicians and media outlets propagate an image of the Swedish government as being anti-Israeli or even anti-Semitic to further their own agenda. As Israeli politics continue to pivot towards the right, Netanyahu and others have courted the right-wing vote as much as possible and attacking the liberal views represented by Sweden has been seen as an easy way to score political points. Much like US President Barack Obama and his Secretary of State John Kerry, the Swedish government has served as a lightning rod for critical commentary. An annual list compiled by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre of the most anti-Semitic or anti-Israeli incidents of 2016 put the US abstention on UN Security Council Resolution 2334 (which criticised illegal Israeli settlements) at the top of the list, while Wallström’s statement on extra-judicial killings came in eighth position.[[67]](#endnote-67) Lists such as this exemplify the erroneous conflation of criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism.

At the same time, unmistakable anti-Semitism across the world is being selectively addressed for political purposes. In the US, the populism that brought President Donald Trump to power has also lead to a resurgence of open anti-Semitism and Nazi sympathies. At the infamous Charlottesville protests in August 2017, neo-Nazi groups chanted “Jews will not replace us” and the old Nazi slogan “blood and soil”.[[68]](#endnote-68) While most of the Israeli political spectrum expressed outrage and condemned Trump’s attempt to equate neo-Nazis with counter-protestors, Netanyahu’s reaction to the violence was remarkably muted and failed to address Trump’s remarks, presumably due to his close relationship with the US President and support for his political agenda.[[69]](#endnote-69) A month earlier, a campaign with clear anti-Semitic connotations against liberal philanthropist George Soros by the populist right-wing Hungarian government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orban was initially condemned by the Israeli embassy, only to be retracted by the Foreign Ministry who then criticized Soros for funding human rights organisations critical of Israel.[[70]](#endnote-70)

According to Swedish officials, Israeli media outlets have said that they sell more papers if Sweden is on the front page.[[71]](#endnote-71) A particularly unpleasant example was an op-ed in the right-wing Israeli newspaper Makor Rishon, written by a former Israeli Education Ministry official Zvi Zameret, who argued that Count Folke Bernadotte was an anti-Semite and that Wallström was no different. Zameret suggests that Bernadotte was guilty of

covert anti-Semitism, ignorance and arrogance, collaboration with senior elements in Israel [Hebrew University President [Judah Magnes](https://books.google.com/books?id=AKsjeQ-m9MoC&pg=PA152&lpg=PA152&dq=judah+magnes+%26+count+bernadotte&source=bl&ots=eGvI-8eM9M&sig=EyIyMNgU4hcd4YDkAXET4tEUWB8&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiX26eh9L_KAhVE9WMKHaPzBUIQ6AEINzAG#v=onepage&q=judah%20magnes%20%26%20count%20bernadotte&f=false)] and interests that play a decisive role. Has anything changed in the Swedish DNA in the decades following Bernadotte’s death? Nothing has changed. The Swedish foreign minister Margot Wallström, in the covert anti-Semitism which characterizes her, along with her ignorance and arrogance, and anticipation of the interests of her future Muslim voters – she too is attempting to battle against the basic foundation of the State of Israel.  I am certain that her intentions will be defeated, just as were those of the disreputable Count Bernadotte.

Although veiled, this can nonetheless be read as an incitement to violence, as commentators like journalist Barak Ravid have argued.[[72]](#endnote-72)

While this may be an extreme example, many Israelis feel that Sweden fails to understand the threats they face and ignores Israeli security needs. Swedish insistence on the importance and preeminence of international law is seen as naivety, something that they can indulge in as the reality of the conflict does not affect them. An Israeli official observed that Israel refused to commit suicide on the basis of international law.[[73]](#endnote-73) In his address to the Malmö synagogue, Löfven went on to stress that while the government was taking steps to ensure the physical security of Jews in Sweden, “long term security is built not by guards, but by values. It is created through togetherness and trust between people, through understanding for each other’s history and culture, through an openness and joy in the face of our similarities and differences”.[[74]](#endnote-74)

**The Peace Process and Beyond**

Prior to the Oslo negotiations, when Israel and the PLO were unable to talk directly with each other, Sweden facilitated communication between them and Israeli doves still believed that Sweden could be trusted despite its close ties to the PLO.[[75]](#endnote-75) This closeness actually made them a particularly attractive intermediary. The current context, however, is very different. Israeli and Palestinian officials can communicate directly, rendering such a third-party role potentially less significant. Moreover, a Swedish role as a mediator has been rendered extremely unlikely, as the Israelis would not accept their involvement. A 2011 op-ed in *The Jerusalem Post* argued thatthen-Foreign Minister “Bildt’s lopsided approach has led to a situation where Sweden’s once noble reputation as an honest peace broker has been tarnished”, and Israeli attitudes have only continued to harden in the years since.[[76]](#endnote-76) According to an Israeli official, neither side of the political spectrum in Israel would embrace Sweden as a mediator.[[77]](#endnote-77)

Rather than acting as a mediator, Sweden is continuing its other traditional advocacy role to affect the international agenda on the conflict. Much like in 2009, Swedish recognition of Palestine sought to affect EU policy. A more unified EU position on Palestinian statehood could serve to strengthen international consensus around the need for a two-state solution, thereby protecting this outcome, and make it possible for some pressure to be exerted on the parties to return to the negotiating table. The broader vision that Swedish officials had discussed with other European Labour parties was for Sweden to take the lead on recognition, and for other countries to follow suit when they were in a position of power to do so, including France, Slovenia, and the UK.[[78]](#endnote-78)

However, this did not come to pass. In the UK, Ed Miliband lost the 2015 elections, and even though socialist Francois Hollande was in power, the French sought to leverage recognition in order to produce results at the international peace conference in Paris in June 2016 and January 2017, without any success. Many parliaments in Europe, including the British, French, Irish, Portuguese, Spanish, and the EU, passed motions to recognise Palestine, but although the Swedish government has pointed to this as some measure of progress, it has little practical impact.[[79]](#endnote-79) The consensus that, for example, Bildt achieved in the 2009 statement (although watered down) has not been replicated due to domestic political reasons in each member state, no doubt amplified by the broader implications of the move.

Although this lack of European momentum has caused some disappointment in the Swedish Foreign Ministry, officials have emphasised that this does not affect the value of the decision in their eyes. There was no detailed, step-by-step strategic plan which fell apart at the first hurdle, but an aspiration to chart a broader normative, European course. Recognition remained “the right thing to do” based on a principled approach to the conflict, and Sweden was happy to stick its head above the parapet on the issue and absorb any Israeli criticism.[[80]](#endnote-80) In this, there is historical continuity. The decision in the early 1970’s to establish relations with the PLO and engage with them as representatives of the Palestinian people was similarly decried by Israel, but eventually came to be adopted as policy. Just as most other European countries did not share Sweden’s view at the time but later came to adopt it, Swedish officials believe that wider recognition of Palestine is only a matter of time.[[81]](#endnote-81)

In the meantime, Sweden continues to be involved in unsuccessful international efforts to advance peace. In conjunction with the international peace conferences convened in Paris, Sweden lead consultations with Israeli and Palestinian civil society organisations. Although the Swedish Foreign Ministry viewed this role as an important vindication of their policy and renewed role in the peace process, the Paris meetings achieved little.[[82]](#endnote-82) *The Economist* lamented that it “felt less like a diplomatic summit than a farewell concert thrown by an ageing rock band”, saluting the outgoing Secretary of State John Kerry and what he tried to achieve.[[83]](#endnote-83) The civil society consultations have reinforced the common knowledge that there is a severe lack of trust between the two sides, and although there are clear merits to improving civil society communication to try to overcome these problems, any substantive impacts are as yet unclear.

When Wallström announced the appointment of a Swedish special representative for the peace process in early 2017, the Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman, Emmanuel Nahshon, responded with derisive sarcasm. “Given the extraordinary successes of this Swedish government in peace making all over the world, we are deeply grateful for the decision to finally solve this region’s illnesses”, he said. “Why couldn’t they come sooner?”[[84]](#endnote-84) Per Örneus, the experienced diplomat who took on the thankless task, has met with Palestinian representatives in Ramallah but has been shunned by Israeli officials on multiple trips.[[85]](#endnote-85) The Israelis made it clear he would effectively be treated like any other tourist: “There are no visa requirements for Swedes to travel to Israel. As for meetings or talks with Israeli representatives, the answer is a direct no”.[[86]](#endnote-86)

It is important to stress, however, that Swedish-Israeli relations are not uniformly negative. Multiple delegations of Swedish parliamentarians have visited Israel in a bid to repair relations, predominantly although not exclusively from the Moderate, Christian Democrat, and Liberal parties who traditionally defend Israel. Mathias Sundin of the Moderates, the leader of one opposition delegation, urged his hosts to “ignore Wallström” and “concentrate on the fact that you have a lot of friends in Sweden”.[[87]](#endnote-87) If one looks beyond the conflict with the Palestinians, a much brighter picture emerges. Israel and Sweden enjoy significant shared economic interests reflected in hundreds of millions of dollars worth of trade. As two tech-savvy start-up nations, there is considerable cooperation within the hi-tech, IT, and telecommunications industries.[[88]](#endnote-88)

The Social Democratic Speaker of parliament Urban Ahlin visited Israel in November 2017 at the invitation of his Knesset counterpart Yuli Edelstein, and the tone was significantly more conciliatory than might have been expected. Ahlin acknowledged that disagreements remained, but that Sweden was keen to develop better relations and cooperation, for example through trade.[[89]](#endnote-89) Ahlin’s visit was swiftly followed by Swedish EU affairs and trade minister, Ann Linde, whose visit focused on innovation and research and development, and led to the announcement of an envoy to bolster bilateral economic cooperation.[[90]](#endnote-90)

**Conclusion**

While there is a theoretical logic to the Swedish approach to Palestine, it has as yet failed to have a tangible impact on the prospects of peace. It has, however, had a significantly negative impact on relations with Israel. While these may gradually improve under future governments, on the current course they are unlikely to ever return to the socialist heyday of the mid-20th century. Just as Golda Meir and Olof Palme disagreed in the 1970’s, fundamental differences in the Israeli and Swedish outlooks on the occupation and the future remain. As this chapter has showed, these differences are also not the exclusive reserve of the Swedish left, but have deeper normative and political roots. In September 2016, Israeli officials were “disappointed” by the visit of then-leader of the main opposition Moderate party, Anna Kinberg Batra. “Before the visit, she presented herself as a close friend and gave us to understand that she would use her visit as a platform for positive statements about Israel. She did not deliver the goods”. In an interview with Swedish press during her trip, she instead referred to illegal Israeli settlements as “unacceptable”.[[91]](#endnote-91) Although there are clear differences in approach and tone, there is a shared belief across the political spectrum in the importance of adhering to international law and the need for a two-state solution.

The suggestion that Swedish policy is in any way anti-Semitic is mistaken at best and at worst, malicious. To draw a straight line between the anti-Semitism that does exist in Sweden and the decisions of government is a distortion of epic proportions. Such overt politicisation of anti-Semitism is damaging to Israel’s long-term interests and the global campaign against this resilient prejudice. The occupation, however, is the most damaging to Israel. As Wallström has written, “It is with concern that we see Israel, a democracy in a turbulent region, drifting away from international law and risking the erosion of its international standing. … Sweden has a long history of friendship with Israel. We are and will remain a good friend”.[[92]](#endnote-92)

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