



# PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## Sovereignty in the Face of International Pressure

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,633, July 9, 2020

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: At critical junctures a national leadership should be expected to uphold its country's sovereign right to pursue its own vital interests, even in the face of heavy international pressure.**

A basic gap exists between sovereignty as an idea and sovereignty as it is practically exercised. As a projection of the sovereignty of God, which represents absolute and limitless rule, from time immemorial autocrats have sought to cast themselves as supreme and unassailable rulers. The advent of nationalism and the modern state substituted the nation for the ruler as the source of sovereignty while subjecting it to legal limitations. International law came to determine the nature of sovereignty by enumerating its possibilities, restrictions, and limitations in interstate relations.

With the establishment of the UN and the burgeoning of international organizations (the EU, the Arab League, etc.) and supranational organizations (e.g., economic conglomerates and nongovernmental organizations), far-reaching limitations were imposed on states in terms of their relations with one another, and the classic image of the nation-state's sovereignty was considerably modified.

There is thus a tension between a) the desire for sovereignty as a supreme governmental prerogative that demonstrates independence in the face of opposition at home and abroad; and b) the notion of limited sovereignty that subordinates intrastate decision-making to international legislation and the agreement of other states. It is in that tension that we find the dispute between PM Benjamin Netanyahu and supporters of the application of Israeli sovereignty to parts of the West Bank on the one side, and on the other, those who—like DM Gantz and FM Ashkenazi—condition the measure on regional and international agreement.

Under such circumstances the question arises: For what purposes, and to what extent, is the state willing and able to demonstrate independence in the face of international opposition?

It was at just such a juncture that David Ben-Gurion stood up in December 1949 to declare Jerusalem the capital of Israel in direct opposition to the stance of the UN. “We see a duty to declare that Jewish Jerusalem is an organic and inseparable part of the state of Israel just as it is an inseparable part of Israeli history, the Jewish faith, and the spirit of our people,” he said. “Jerusalem is the very heart of the state of Israel.”

Netanyahu considers the issue of applying sovereignty to be of similar gravity. He believes a historic opportunity has presented itself to Israel—one that may never return. Acting on that opportunity requires the exercise of political independence regardless of the limitations and the risks.

Netanyahu does not deny the array of international constraints, just as his opponents have not completely renounced the fundamental value of sovereign decision-making. But they seem to disagree about the nature of such sovereignty and what it means for a nation-state’s freedom of action.

*This is an edited version of an article that was published in the June issue of Liberal.*

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