

The EU and the Israel-Palestine Test

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“The Resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict is a fundamental interest of the EU. The EU’s objective is a two-state solution with an independent, democratic, viable and contiguous Palestinian state living side-by-side in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbours (https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/middle-east-peace-process_en)”.

Although the US has often prided itself of the status of sole interlocutor in the Middle East “conflict”, it has equally gained the reputation of an interested and biased mediator. In parallel, the European Community or EC – now European Union, EU – claimed to have a ‘more balanced’ approach on the Middle East file, which in turn garnered Palestinians’ trust. But during the current escalation, the EU has been woefully disunited. This blog argues that a more unified European voice can only come about by “walking the talk” of an Israel-Palestine policy/peace agreement based on purported basic European values.

In the early 1970s, just after the Yom Kippur War, the EC launched the Euro-Arab Dialogue, followed by a declaration in Venice (in June 1980) stating the *“right to existence and security of all the States in the region, including Israel, and justice for all the peoples”*, implying the *“recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and the acknowledgment of the Palestinian right to self-determination and of the (Palestine Liberation Organization) PLO to play a role”*.

Following the Oslo Accords of 1993, the EU pronounced its willingness to become a more decisive player in the resolution of the “Arab-Israeli conflict” which led to the Quartet on the Middle East’s Road Map of 2003. Thus, gradually, the EU was transformed from an observer to a leading and indispensable partner in the Middle East peace process.

However, the EU’s advocacy for Palestinian democracy as an important pillar of conflict resolution was severely tested during the 2006 Palestinian elections, when Change and Reform (Hamas) won 74 of the 132 seats. The EU’s own observation mission deemed the elections as free, fair and transparent, concluding that: *“Open and well-run parliamentary elections strengthen Palestinian commitment to democratic institutions”*. Yet, upon pressure from the US and Israel, the EU co-boycotted the democratically elected Hamas government, stoking Palestinian political tensions. This reaction, in turn, provoked a short civil war in June 2007 that left Hamas in control of Gaza and President Mahmoud Abbas, leader of Fatah, in control of the West Bank.

These events reverberate to this day, when, during Hamas’s 7 October 2023 surprise assault on southern Israel, 1,400 people were killed and hundreds were taken as hostages. In response, Israel has launched a series of air strikes over Gaza, as well as (limited) ground operations, that so far have killed more than 8,000 people and injured 18,500 others (at the time of writing). ^

For the EU, one thing is certain: Israel's war on Gaza is another crisis at its doorstep. This in turn means another test to its internal and international politics. The Israel/Palestine case is particularly tough because, the 'balanced approach' notwithstanding, Europe's track record so far is not underpinned by any strong sense of common vision. Historically, internal disunity is perhaps best illustrated by the basic disagreement on whether to recognize Palestinian statehood or not: some member states such as Sweden, Malta and Cyprus have done so, while most others have not.

This disunity is now on full display. Contradictory statements emerged from the EU's top diplomats: While European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen and European Parliament president Roberta Metsola reassured (<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/10/10/commissioner-varhelyi-went-solo-with-suspension-of-eu-funds-for-palestinians-prompting-u-t>) Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu that "Israel can count on the EU", and Commissioner for neighbourhood and enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, declared (<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/eu-von-der-leyen-parliament-chief-metsola-head-israel.1060923>) that the 27-nation bloc was immediately suspending "all (aid) payments" to the Palestinians, Josep Borrell, the EU's foreign affairs chief, claimed (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/10/eu-aid-to-palestinians-will-not-be-cancelled-as-decision-reversed>) that the "overwhelming majority" of EU states were in favour of continued support, adding the funds would "not be cancelled". Simultaneously, Denmark, Germany, Sweden and Austria announced (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/11/gaza-sealed-palestinians-face-aid-freezes-too>) a suspension of their development aid to Palestine. Efforts to show more common purpose have not succeeded: the UN General Assembly vote saw Europe more divided than perhaps any other continent, with half of the EU member states abstaining, eight voting in favour and five against.

How is the EU to gain orientation in such a situation of multiple voices and conflicting statements? One could argue that the best – indeed the only – way for the EU is to rely on the self-proclaimed values upon which the European Union was founded as the bedrock for a more deliberate, thought-through response: respect for international law, equality, democracy, human rights, moderation, and peaceful co-existence.

The crisis is a test of the EU and its member states' commitment to international human rights and humanitarian law globally and in each individual case. In Israel and Palestine, passing this test implies reacting to each individual instance where serious breaches of **international humanitarian and human rights law** (<https://blog.prif.org/2023/10/26/mass-evacuations-in-israels-war-against-hamas-taking-precautions-in-attack-or-forced-displacement/>) are committed (such as indiscriminate killings/bombings, hostage taking, blockade, etc.) in a consistent and uniform manner, in strength of reaction and in words chosen.

The crisis is also a test case on how to deal with demagoguery and dehumanizing language – something that Europe knows all too well from its own past. Calling Palestinians "human animals" (as the Israeli minister of defense did on 9 October) is utterly unacceptable and dangerous. Calling for the killing of Jews is equally unacceptable. Europe must stand up against hate speech which is often a precursor of excessive violence.

This crisis is also a test case on how to deal with democratic and liberal backsliding – or with the lack of respect for basic elements of democratic rule (such as the holding of regular elections) in the first place. We see the danger of it, in Hamas, in Fatah – and the EU should be vociferous and consistent on

this – but also the erosion of Israeli democracy, the undermining of its existing mechanisms of the rule of law and separation of powers and its treatment of Palestinians in what has widely been labelled as an apartheid system (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>).

The crisis is also a test of moderation. The atrocious killings in Israel were acts of terrorism that targeted civilians to instill terror as a step to achieve political aims. Israel's unproportionate warfare, potential war crimes (targeting of schools and hospitals) and indiscriminate killings have also to be investigated as potential, serious breaches of international humanitarian law.

It is, finally, a test case for Europe to confront its history in a more holistic way. Before and during the Second World War far too many in Europe either actively committed or condoned the genocide against Jews (as well as Roma and other "undesirable" groups). This is a stain that does not – and should not – fade. Europe should now also recognize the stain of colonial crimes, and that its dark past is now being paid for by Israeli and Palestinian lives.

It is time for Europe to rely on its purported common values in working towards de-escalation and eventually a solution to the Israel – Palestine conflict.

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