

Europe and the Israel-Palestine Conflict: A Call for Coherence

by Andrea Dessì

Overshadowed by multiple crises and geopolitical tensions, the Israel-Palestinian conflict remains a significant driver for regional instability and should be considered a key testing ground for the EU's new Global Strategy.

While the EU cannot realistically emerge as the lead diplomatic actor in the so-called peace process, and has traditionally struggled to move from being "a payer to a player" in Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy, contemporary developments may provide an opening for a more coherent approach.

The Israeli government has no intention whatsoever of agreeing to a withdrawal from the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Over 6,742 housing units have been advanced for Israeli settlements since January 2017, a considerable increase from the 2,613 registered in 2016, the 1,732 approved in 2015 and back to the high numbers of

2014, when 6,929 units were advanced.¹ These numbers, coupled with a whole series of declarations coming from different mainstream political parties in Israel, provide a clear window into the priorities of the Israeli political establishment and demonstrate the government's complete abdication to Israel's "settlement-industrial complex".

If the EU is serious about support for Palestinian rights and wishes to act on the objectives laid out in its new Global Strategy, then Palestine will (again) emerge as a key litmus test for the EU's credibility.

Two areas can be highlighted for concerted EU action: Palestinian reconciliation and the rehabilitation of Gaza, and sustainable development in East Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank.

¹ Peace Now, "Escalation in Israel's Settlement Policy. The Creation of De-Facto Annexation", in *Settlement Watch*, November 2017.

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The recent intra-Palestinian reconciliation deal, while still in its infancy and open to many challenges, does represent an opportunity for renewed EU engagement. While the US has issued warnings regarding Hamas's participation in any Palestinian government, the EU should approach these developments with more caution.² Initial reactions included increasing EU aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees and reaffirming Europe's commitment to unity between the West Bank and Gaza.³

The reconciliation deal was born out of a mixture of regional and domestic pressures, and Hamas's recent leadership change, combined with its decision to modify the Hamas Charter and allow the Palestinian Authority (PA) to take over Gaza's border crossings, represent unprecedented moves that deserve careful analysis. The EU should allow time for the parties to develop agreed modalities for power sharing before passing judgement.

Disarming Hamas and reuniting Gaza and the West Bank do represent important objectives, helping to consolidate Palestinian positions and pave the way for long-overdue elections. Yet, it would be unrealistic to expect Hamas to unilaterally disarm without concrete socio-economic,

political and security guarantees. A complete capitulation of Hamas, as some in the region and in the Palestinian movement Fatah seem to believe is necessary, would likely drive members underground, and potentially into the hands of more radical groups active in the Strip.

A reactivation of the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) at Gaza's Rafah crossing is a potentially welcome development, yet the mission needs (a) to be expanded considerably, as a 15-member staff is grossly insufficient, and (b) its operational capabilities and mandate need to be revised, where possible increasing independence from Israel while also (re)examining the feasibility of adding a maritime component to the mission.⁴ Coordination with Israel will of course be necessary, but the headquarters of the EUBAM mission could be re-located from Tel Aviv to Gaza, with side offices in Cairo, Tel Aviv and Ramallah, as a means to increase transparency and joint ownership of the mission.

The EU should also use its leverage with Israel and Egypt to (a) substantially increase freedom of movement for Palestinian residents in Gaza, increasing fishing rights and the provision of reconstruction materials to the Strip in coordination with the PA; and (b) exert concerted pressure to lift the 10-year blockade of Gaza, allowing increased trade, energy exploration rights and the (re)building of Gaza's international airport as well as a seaport, two demands that remain

² Barak Ravid, "U.S.: If Hamas Wants Any Role in Palestinian Government, It Must Disarm and Recognize Israel", in *Ha'aretz*, 19 October 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.818062>.

³ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Statement by the Spokesperson on Gaza and intra-Palestinian reconciliation*, Brussels, 9 November 2017, <http://europa.eu/!DY74gM>.

⁴ Dimitris Bouris, "Europe & Building Palestine", in *Revolve Media*, 15 November 2010, <http://revolve.media/europe-building-palestine>.

unresolved notwithstanding reports that a majority of the Israeli cabinet, with the exception of Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman, support their establishment.⁵

Moving to the occupied West Bank, the EU should redouble its focus on supporting Palestinian economic and social development, particularly in Area C of the West Bank and in East Jerusalem. Equal to over 60 percent of the occupied West Bank and under complete Israeli civil and military control, Area C is of critical importance to the sustainability of a two state formula. The EU must insist on its right to provide long-term humanitarian and development assistance to these communities, and do so on the condition that the PA is included in these efforts. Only by increasing the interdependence of urban and development planning between Areas A, B and C of the West Bank can the present cantonization of Palestinian communities be curtailed.

In this context, the EU's External Action Service should undertake a major review of European aid to Palestine. Palestinian society is littered with vocal and committed grassroots organizations, from village councils to student movements and advocacy groups, and the EU must empower these local actors directly, including in East Jerusalem. Moreover, the internal

⁵ Barak Ravid, "Israeli Ministers Support Building Island off Gaza, No Decision Reached Because of Lieberman's Objection", in *Ha'aretz*, 13 June 2017. See also Amir Tibon, "A Gaza Seaport That Doesn't Endanger Israel? Not a Pipe Dream with This Expert's Plan", in *Ha'aretz*, 5 October 2017.

review of EU aid to Palestine must be done against a backdrop of reports that over 72 percent of foreign aid to Palestine actually ends up benefitting the Israeli economy.⁶

Demanding reparations from Israel for the demolition or confiscation of EU-funded humanitarian structures in Area C is another area for important EU action. Since 2009, when the EU first began reporting on such instances, some 400 EU-funded structures have been demolished or seized by Israel, worth over 1.2 million euro of EU taxpayer money.⁷ In October 2017, eight EU member states joined forces to demand compensation (30,000 euros) for such demolitions, the first time such an event has occurred.⁸

The EU must follow through and extract adequate costs from Israel each time it violates international or EU law. To do so effectively, ancillary initiatives such as a consortium launched by five international NGOs in January 2015 to help coordinate activities and assist Palestinians in resisting forcible

⁶ Shir Hever, "How Much International Aid to Palestinians Ends Up in the Israeli Economy?", in *Aid Watch*, September 2015, <http://www.aidwatch.ps/node/489>.

⁷ European Union-Office of the European Union Representative (West Bank and Gaza Strip, UNRWA), *Six-Month Report on Demolitions and Confiscations of EU funded structures in the West Bank including East Jerusalem, March 2017-August 2017*, 4 October 2017, <http://europa.eu/!wx84jG>.

⁸ Samuel Osborne, "West Bank Settlements: Eight EU Countries Demand Israel Pay for Demolished Palestinian Schools", in *The Independent*, 19 October 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/west-bank-settlements-israel-palestinian-solar-panels-homes-destroyed-countries-pay-back-europe-a8008361.html>.

transfer from their lands,⁹ necessitate concrete political support from Brussels and member state capitals in order to increase their impact and international visibility. Funded by nine international donors, the initiative represents one potential avenue for EU member states to pool their resources and leverage, enhancing their ability to resist Israel's discriminatory policies.

Given the unlikelihood of a major diplomatic breakthrough in the short-to-medium term, the EU should prioritize internal coordination among individual member states and EU institutions. The objective should be to come up with new benchmarks and targeted accountability measures capable of bringing concrete benefits to local communities while preserving the eventuality of a two state framework by enhancing Palestinian social, economic and political development.

There are no quick fix solutions and any policy approach will be open to criticisms of double standards or simply falling short in what many believe to be a lost cause. Yet, the unveiling of the EU's Global Strategy, with its key emphasis on pooling EU leverage and influence from a variety of EU policy sectors and instruments, can represent an opportunity – perhaps the *last opportunity* – for a more coherent EU approach.

Staying the course and simply replicating past formats and strategies will not bring change and will ultimate

consolidate the EU – together with the UN and other international actors, *in primis* the US – as being part of the problem and not of the solution in Israel/Palestine.

That of empowering new generations of local activists and leaders coupled with a concerted effort to ensure that Israeli and Palestinian authorities comply with EU laws and standards should represent the bare minimum of any EU approach. This would not only serve the high cause of peace, but also and simultaneously help the EU protect its credibility and soft power in Palestine, the region and the broader international system at large.

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⁹ UN Career, *External Evaluation of the Initiative*, 9 August 2017, <https://uncareer.net/vacancy/external-evaluation-west-bank-protection-consortium-129049>.

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