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## The EU and the Israel-Hamas War

### Introduction

The Middle East conundrum is diachronically linked to the non-resolution of the Palestinian Question. While different phases of history reveal different aspects of the problem, emphasis is currently on Hamas and the war in the Gaza Strip. On 7 October 2023, Hamas, designated as a terrorist group by the EU and most countries in the West, including the USA, attacked Israel. The terrorist organisation fired rockets and its militants killed approximately 1200 citizens, while they took about 240 hostages, carrying them across the Gaza border.<sup>1</sup> Israel responded by launching a military campaign from land and sea that was soon followed by a ground operation. The death toll exceeded 10,000 in a period of just one month.<sup>2</sup> The new Middle East conflict is generating serious concern to the EU which is dealing with massive instability in its neighbourhood. Without being responsible for the problem, the EU needs to overcome internal divisions, mitigate consequences and push toward a two-state solution under extreme circumstances.

### The European Response

The immediate response of the EU to the atrocities of 7 October 2023 was to express its solidarity with Israel, a like-minded partner, and the only democracy in the Middle East. One week later, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Parliament President Roberta Metsola visited the country and met with the Israeli leadership. In her remarks, von der Leyen was clear that 'Europe stands with Israel [and that] Israel has a right to defend itself'. She also said that 'Hamas alone is responsible for what is happening' and that the actions of Hamas have nothing to do with the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people<sup>3</sup>. The expression of sympathy vis-à-vis Israel was natural after the terrorist attacks but were certainly appreciated by the latter, which had been rather suspicious of Europe's attitude regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the period prior to the attack.

The stance of the President of the European Commission generated some debate in Europe. Ursula von der Leyen faced some criticism for not speaking up about the humanitarian consequences of Israel's retaliatory attacks.<sup>4</sup> A few days before her visit to Israel, foreign affairs ministers in the EU member states were already leaning toward this direction. While they condemned the Hamas attacks and agreed with Israel's right to self-defence, they also 'called for the protection of civilians and restraint, the release of hostages, for allowing access to food, water and medicines to Gaza in line with international humanitarian law, and opening humanitarian corridors'<sup>5</sup>. Israel's military response would be strong and ministers of the member states anticipated a new crisis for Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip.

The three biggest European countries, France, Germany and Italy, along with the USA and UK also expressed their support to Israel. In a joint statement, they made clear that the terrorist attacks by Hamas had no justification and distinguished between its aspirations and those of the Palestinian people.<sup>6</sup> Soon, several European leaders visited Israel, including Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and President Emmanuel Macron, respectively. For her part, President von der Leyen opted for a more balanced approach when she spoke in the European Parliament on 18 October 2023. In her speech, she linked the Israeli response to the need to preserve international law and said that there was no contradiction 'in standing in solidarity with Israel and acting on the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people'<sup>7</sup>. In the interim, Israel's strategy to eradicate Hamas was evolving and would soon lead to the invasion of Gaza.

The more the Israeli Defence Forces continued their bombardment in Gaza and expanded their military presence in the enclave, the more nuanced the statements of the EU and European countries became. Without abandoning their support of Israel, most European states started to focus on the situation in the Gaza Strip. On the sidelines of the Cairo Summit on 21 October 2023, for instance, Premier Giorgia Meloni

had a cordial meeting with President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas. Further to this, when he visited Israel three days later, President Macron went to Ramallah to meet with his Palestinian counterpart. The European Council of 27 and 28 October saw leaders of member states underline the importance of ensuring the protection of all civilians, as well as allowing safe humanitarian access and aid to reach those in need, including the reopening of relevant corridors.<sup>8</sup>

The continuation of Israel’s war against Hamas made it particularly complicated for the EU to preserve its unity. Member states disagreed about if and how this war could be viewed with respect to the basic humanitarian needs of the Palestinians. The conflicting attitudes became evident on 26 October 2023. Following the failure of the UN Security Council to address the Israel-Hamas war, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for an ‘immediate, durable and sustained humanitarian truce’ in Gaza. 120 countries voted in favour, 14 abstained and 14 voted against it. As the table below demonstrates, EU member states were divided. Most preferred to abstain, while four, namely Austria, Croatia, Czechia and Hungary voted against the resolution, and eight, namely Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain voted in its favour. In his speech, EU Representative at the UN, Olof Skoog discussed the humanitarian dimension. He also said the EU would be ready to contribute towards the resumption of the political process on the basis of a two-state solution and that it supported the holding of an international peace conference as soon as possible.<sup>9</sup>

**Table: The stance of EU member states in the UN vote of 26 October 2023**

In Favour	Against	Abstention
Belgium	Austria	Bulgaria
France	Croatia	Cyprus
Ireland	Czechia	Denmark
Luxembourg	Hungary	Estonia
Malta		Finland
Portugal		Germany
Slovenia		Greece
Spain		Italy
		Lithuania
		Latvia
		Netherlands
		Poland
		Romania
		Slovakia
		Sweden

## Challenges and Priorities

Disagreements between member states amid the hostilities in the Middle East did not prevent the EU from taking action on several practical issues. Providing support to people living in Gaza has been one consistent factor. In the first weeks of the war, the EU launched a humanitarian air bridge to facilitate the delivery of aid to Palestinians. This bridge mainly consisted of several flights to Egypt. Further to this, the Civil Protection Mechanism was activated to offer support for repatriation flights from Israel. At the beginning of November, the European Commission decided to provide a further €25 million in humanitarian aid, an amount that quadruples EU humanitarian assistance to over €100 million for Gaza in 2023. The new assistance will enable humanitarian organisations to deliver life-saving aid, with particular focus on water and sanitation, health, food and other essential items.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, the EU has linked the war in Gaza to its migration policies. The potential displacement of Palestinians due to the war is seen as (inter alia, interpreted from this prism) one of the likely outcomes of this conflict. The Justice and Home Affairs Council of 19-20 October 2023 witnessed ministers of member states focus on the need to engage with non-EU countries with a view to further develop a model that would hinder irregular migration. The search for an external solution to migration could find resonance in the preparation of new agreements that could resemble the relevant EU-Tunisian example. Reportedly, the European Commission is in the process of negotiating a deal with Egypt to ensure that Palestinian refugees would be held there and not move to Europe.<sup>11</sup> Critics, however, argue that the EU is principally shifting its attention toward weakening right-wing anti-immigration movements, seeking to turn Europe into a fortress, and simultaneously passing on security problems<sup>12</sup> to others<sup>13</sup>.

Migration policies are subsequently connected to European internal security considerations. Terror attacks, which took place in Belgium and France after the beginning of hostilities in the Middle East, alarmed authorities. Against this backdrop, member states agreed to improve the screening of migrants and asylum seekers and expel those deemed a security risk more quickly.<sup>14</sup> In tandem with these measures, the EU has prioritised the security of its own citizens. The Israel-Hamas war unleashed waves of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia across several

countries. The protection against violence and discrimination has subsequently become a challenge in Europe after 7 October 2023. It is therefore part of ongoing European discussions.<sup>15</sup> Among other things, the European Commission strongly condemned anti-Semitic incidents in countries such as France and Germany and reiterated that EU law criminalises public incitement to hatred and violence.

## The Aftermath

The Israel-Hamas war is synthesised around the determination of Israel to militarily eradicate Hamas. However, perspectives relating to long-term stability in the region are not positive. The eradication of Hamas has been accompanied by a large death toll in the Gaza Strip. The wounds suffered by Israelis and Palestinians after Hamas's atrocities and the subsequent Israeli response are not expected to be healed, while the trauma of history remains largely emotional for the Palestinians and the Arab world. Under these circumstances, the role of the EU becomes more complex in a changing world order. The EU has attempted to assist the Middle East peace process for years through its participation in the Quartet – along with the UN, the USA and Russia. The Quartet can hardly operate in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Any hope of cooperation is fading away and international conditions favour confrontation rather than unity in support of peace.<sup>16</sup>

The EU steadily supports the creation of a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. In a recent *Financial Times* article, the EU's High Representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell, writes that a non-resolution to the Palestinian Question 'may trigger a displacement of people, including towards Europe, and exacerbate the risk of terrorism and inter-community tensions'.<sup>17</sup> The assessment is correct. Although discussions for the creation of two states cannot be held at the moment and previous experience does not generate optimism about a potential breakthrough, it is the EU's responsibility to insist on this plan. Israel certainly makes its own security calculations which are not always aligned with the European position, but the EU is generally considered a reliable actor in the Arab world. In 1980, the then European Economic Community was first in line to talk about the self-determination of Palestinians. Decades later it

remains in the interests of the EU to preserve a balanced policy.

Last but not least, the turmoil in the Middle East is causing some concern to the EU with regard to potential consequences on the Ukrainian front. US President Biden has made clear that both Israel and Ukraine are vital for America's national security.<sup>18</sup> In a similar vein, the joint statement of the US-EU summit of 20 October 2023 repeated the commitment of the transatlantic allies to long-term political, financial, humanitarian and military support for Ukraine and its people.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the difficulty of the multidimensional task and the risk of an escalation in the Middle East are not to be ignored. Also, the lack of certainty about the re-election of President Biden in November 2024 complicates matters. European security is significantly dependent on the USA and this dependence becomes more evident in turbulent times.

## Conclusion

The Israel-Hamas war constitutes a serious challenge in Europe's backyard. The harmonisation of policies of member states following the terrorist attack of 7 October 2023 is a tall order. It is particularly difficult – during hostilities – to achieve a convergence of positions in simultaneously supporting Israel's right to live in security and the Palestinians' right to live in peace and dignity. In spite of divergences, the EU attempts to play a role by providing humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians, responding to security challenges, dealing with migration and combatting anti-Semitism as well as Islamophobia. The EU is also vocal in publicly pushing for a two-state solution. Criticism concerning the lack of unity and the efficiency of some European policies certainly exists, but this needs to be placed into context. The very complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict puts some limits on what external actors might be able to achieve in the region.

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