

What future role should the EU play in the Israeli Palestinian conflict?

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1. Introduction

It was a poignant moment, in the aftermath of the recent Paris attacks, when European and world leaders marched hand in hand in defiance of the threat of terror and radicalisation. Among them, in the first row, were the Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu and the Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas. This image of two leaders from feuding nations, marching together, with European leaders, could be a significant symbolic gesture for a future role for the EU in resolving the conflict between them.

In recent years the EU has been steadily assuming a more influential role in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. In June 2009 the EU released a document calling for a two-state solution to the Israeli Palestinian conflict. It hailed the US commitment to the 'road map' and urged the two sides to commit to a long-standing peace agreement based on the two-state solution. In 2009 the EU was happy to be a supporter of the US backed policy for the region, yet slightly reluctant to move from the relative safety of the passenger seat of the Israeli Palestinian peace talks bus. It seems that this approach has changed recently, and that the current EU administration is ready to negotiate this turbulent and rocky journey and try to lead it to a safe and peaceful conclusion.

Under his current presidency of the European Commission, Jean Claude Juncker advocates a greater role for the EU in the attempts to reach a long-lasting solution to the conflict. In his election campaign, Juncker noted that Europe should be much more active in its foreign policy regarding global conflicts, and should seek to implement its powers beyond the 'soft tools' previously employed by it (Juncker 2014). (http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/docs/pg_en.pdf#page=11)

2. Economic Relations

The current EU commitments to trade in the region, especially with the PA, show the importance of this part of the world to EU policy. The EU is currently the main trading body with the PA, and it also has significant trading agreements with Israel, although admittedly not as significant as those of the US¹ with Israel. The EU is also involved with various support plans for better governance in the PA. The EU assistance to Palestine is structured in the following three separate components:

¹ When one takes into account the yearly US grants and financial support offered to Israel by the US.

1) Direct Financial Support

Launched in February 2008, the EU mechanism called "PEGASE" backed the three-year Palestinian Reform and Development Plan (PRDP) aimed primarily at helping the Palestinian Authority to meet its recurrent expenditure (salaries and pensions, assistance to vulnerable Palestinian families) and the delivery of public services.

In 2013 and 2014, nearly €170 million of direct financial assistance to the PA was provided under PEGASE on a yearly basis.

2) Support to Palestine refugees

For the period 2011-13 the EU made annual contributions to UNRWA's general fund of at least €80 million. In 2014 a new joint declaration between the EU and UNRWA was signed, bringing the baseline EU contribution to UNRWA to €82 million yearly.

3) Development programmes

EU-funded development assistance programmes to Palestine are in line with priorities set by the Palestinian Authority and focus on three main sectors:

- Rule of law, including support to justice and security and local governance
- Private sector and trade
- Water infrastructures and land development

In 2014, the funds allocated under the EU assistance for these priorities amounted to nearly €50 million, which included a €10 million project for East Jerusalem.

In addition to this assistance the PA is eligible for funding under the following EU's thematic programmes:

- European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)
- Non-state Actors and Local Authorities
- Civil Society Facility
- Food Security Thematic Programme
- Investing in People and Gender equality
- Migration
- Cultural Programmes.

Together with Israel and Jordan, Palestine participates in the *Partnership for Peace* programme; its overall objective is to support the peace process and to provide a solid foundation at civil society level for a just and lasting settlement in the Middle East. The programme receives a yearly contribution of €5 million.

Between the years 2011 and 2014 the EU has allocated approximately €387 million to support the PA.

Parallel to this, Israel is an important trading partner for the EU in the Mediterranean area, and the EU is the number one trading partner for Israel with total trade amounting to approximately €29 billion in 2013, a third of the total trade between Israel and the world. The EU exports of goods to Israel are dominated by machinery and transport equipment, chemicals, and other semi-manufactures. The EU imports from Israel are also dominated by chemicals, machinery and transport equipment, fuels and mining products but almost as important is the arms trade between the two sides.

€397 million worth of arms and munition were imported from Israel between 2009 and 2013, and €81 Euros exported to Israel from the EU (http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113402.pdf).

In December 2014, following a debate held in November with Federica Mogherini, [High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy](#) and Vice-

President of the European Commission, MEPs gave their backing to a resolution that in principle supports Palestinian statehood, “hand in hand” with a reinvigorated peace process by voting in favour of “in principle” recognition of Palestinian statehood and the two-state solution. (http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2014/191214_ep_plenary_en.htm). Mogherini herself earlier that year in a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated: “...We have threats and challenges, more threats than challenges, in the region. It's not only your threats and challenges: it's also in European interests to have stability and security and peace in this part of the region, and we are convinced that the European Union can have a major role in supporting a solution.” (Mogherini 2014).

3. What could be gained by the EU’s playing a more pivotal role?

It is important to stress the case for a greater involvement in the conflict, as many EU citizens and politicians would argue that there are far bigger issues to attend to within the EU before it can focus its time and resources on the Middle East. The Ukrainian conflict has the potential to bring war to the EU’s doorstep; immigration is a constant sore point to almost all EU members; the Eurozone’s economic problems are far from being resolved. This point has some weight to it, but it is possible that greater involvement in solving or promoting understanding between the two sides could in fact bring positive change concerning those challenges faced by the EU. A more pivotal role in the conflict would increase the EU global positioning within the balance of power; the EU will be seen as a force to be reckoned with among its international peers. It is important to remember the intricate and complex ties that lie at the heart of the conflict, and a greater EU role in the conflict would positively influence the way the EU is seen in Cairo, Qatar, Teheran and other Middle Eastern power hubs.

Raising the EU profile within both the Jewish and Muslim communities in all EU member states could bring a wave of Pro-EU support among them. It could also prove to be a trump card against the Eurosceptics. Let us remember what a high profile place the conflict has among Europeans. An EU led peace agreement could see the EU gaining on three levels, namely the global, regional and domestic. The global level, which is often discussed in terms of the balance of power within the international arena, is arguably most salient. The regional aspect will promote stability and security for the EU and its neighbours. On a domestic level, such action will promote support for the union among Europeans.

One final point that could be a major gain to the EU and could again been seen as a political coup to its supporters will be the potential decrease in the numbers of refugees from the Middle East. Promoting stability in the Middle East will help address the main reasons for people of that region to flee to Europe. Should a move to settle the conflict be successful, its ripple effect will be felt among the entire region, in much the same way as the Arab spring is still affecting this region’s stability.

4. Why now?

So what is it about this moment in time that represents the possibility of a greater role for the EU in solving the conflict? The relationship between the Obama administration and the two sides is at an all-time low. The US-led mediation has ultimately failed. President Abbas commented in a meeting with representatives of the Israeli peace camp recently that he should perhaps stop even meetings such as this, as they give the false pretence that the peace process is still alive. The US administration has shown again and again its disappointment and at times antagonism towards Benjamin Netanyahu and his government.

Involvement of other stakeholders in the region is minimal. Russia is engulfed in its own political and economic challenges, whilst China and the UN are focusing on Syria and the

IS challenge much more than on the Israeli Palestinian conflict. The EU finds itself in a favourable position to present itself as key mediator: the European Parliament recently recognised Palestine as a state. The European Court of Justice has ousted Hamas from its list of terror organisations, a move well received within the PA, and one that did not result in too much of a negative response from the Israelis (this has since been challenged by Brussels). In March 2015 the Israeli people voted to keep Netanyahu in power. The Israeli election campaign run by Netanyahu employed a very negative rhetoric with regards to the Palestine and the two-state solution. It is however, important to make the distinction between heated electoral rhetoric and actual policies.

Indeed, shortly after his election Netanyahu claimed that some of his more apparently uncompromising remarks had been misinterpreted. It is even possible that Netanyahu's win and the formation of a right wing coalition in Israel could provide an opportunity for the EU if it wishes to act now. The EU has always played a long game, with regards to the Middle East conflict. Netanyahu and Obama clearly have a difficult relationship; the US president did not make the obligatory congratulation phone call to the prime minister elect until almost a week after the election result, and in that call he reiterated his commitment to the two-state solution. It is safe to assume that the Israelis will now find themselves isolated in the global political arena. The right wing coalition will be on a collision course with global leaders concerning the two-states solution, the Iran nuclear agreement, territorial disputes in the Jewish settlements in the west bank and other related questions.

Should the EU present itself as a possible mediator now, it could be pleasantly surprised by the willingness of the current Israeli leadership to enter into a dialogue. This dialogue in time could sow the seeds for a process that might flourish in future years.

From the PA political side, reconciliation between Hamas and the PA has paved the way for a united Palestinian front that would speak for all Palestinians both from the West Bank and the Gaza strip. Within Israel the united Israeli Arab party is now the third biggest party in the Knesset (the Israeli parliament), and it supports the Palestinian rights for independence and the peace process. References have already been made to the economic dependency of the PA on the EU, while at the same time the PA feels considerable mistrust towards the US administration. If the EU could persuade the PA that it is a valid and creditable interlocutor with the Israeli government the PA might well see the EU as welcome partner in the search for a lasting Middle East settlement.

5. What are the challenges ahead? Do the sides actually want peace?

Should the EU take up the baton of mediation in this conflict? A few points should be acknowledged here. Firstly, it is important to engage with both sides and find out if there is a genuine will to resolve the impasse between them. Both sides have come close before with the process known as the "Oslo Agreement". Those of us that remember the historic ceremony in the White House can still recite the late Prime Minister Rabin words "We have come to try and put an end to the hostilities, so that our children, our children's children, will no longer experience the painful cost of war, violence and terror" (Rabin 1993). <http://www.rabincenter.org.il/Items/01100/signingoftheDeclationofPrinciples.pdf>

Almost two years to the day of the signing ceremony, a radical Jewish assassin shot Rabin. Rabin's words seem somewhat hollow considering the events that followed in the twenty years after they were spoken. Radicals from both sides will try to hamper any deal brokered. Finding a reliable partner for negotiations, will be a hard task for the EU.

Moreover, taking a lead mediatory role in the conflict will be a real test to the unity of the EU. It is one thing to assume that most member states will support in principle the effort to mediate between the sides, but maintaining a unified European front in face of the turbulence that will inevitably occur during negotiations is a different matter altogether.

Norway dealt with this matter previously by simply keeping negotiations covert, before going public with a final document.

6. Conclusion

This paper sets forth a clear case for the EU to take on a significant leading role in resolving the on-going dispute between the Israeli and the Palestinians. This bloody conflict has scarred the lives of almost everyone living in the region. It has also touched the hearts and minds of many Europeans. This paper has attempted to go beyond the strong opinions and feelings involved in covering this issue. Rather, this paper is trying to focus on why the EU, perhaps surprisingly, finds itself in a position that could enact lasting change in the region. Should the EU prevail by leading the two sides to peace, Europe may finally come close to finding an answer to the “Eastern question”, and help create a ripple effect that can provide significant change not only in Europe and the Middle East, but around the globe.

It would be naïve to ignore the difficulties faced by all parties. Edward Said alluded in the preface to the 2003 edition of his masterpiece *Orientalism* to the “pride and arrogance” prevalent both in the West and in the Islamic world. “*Orientalism's* first page opens with a 1975 description of the Lebanese Civil War that ended in 1990, but the violence and the ugly shedding of human blood continues up to this minute. We have had the failure of the Oslo peace process, the outbreak of the second intifada, and the awful suffering of the Palestinians on the reinvaded West Bank and Gaza, with Israeli F-16's and Apache helicopters used routinely on the defenceless civilians as part of their collective punishment.” (Said 2003).

Even so, Said admits later in his book that he still remains optimistic. This must be the right perspective to be adopted by anyone calling for an end to the conflict. The EU is a new phenomenon in the global political landscape, and it could bring with it a much-needed fresh perspective to old feuds. It will require the same sort of patient and meticulous calculations that required landing a fridge size spacecraft on a comet hurling through space, but then again, the European Space Agency has proved it can do exactly that; why not its more earthly relative?

See also <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-32117501>, 1 April 2015