

Europe's Response to the Israel-Hamas War and Implications on EU's Foreign Policy¹

Introduction

The war between Israel and Hamas was sparked on October 7, 2023, by a series of Hamas attacks against Israel near the border with the Gaza Strip. This was called Operation al-Aqsa Flood. These large-scale terrorist attacks, launched on the territory of Israel by Hamas is supported by several organizations such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. These attacks mark the start of a new crisis in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More than a thousand four hundred people have been killed in Israel since the beginning of October 2023. Strikes carried out by Israel in retaliation have killed some three thousand people, mostly civilians, including hundreds of children, according to local authorities.

Foreign reactions to this war can be categorized into three types of responses: countries firmly supporting Israel, countries calling for a ceasefire, and countries supporting Hamas. This crisis accentuates the world division as most Western countries are supporting Israel whereas countries from Asia call for a ceasefire. By providing full support to Israel in its war against Hamas, the West aroused the anger of Arab states, and many countries in the South rallied to the Palestinian cause. But beyond this traditional fault line, divisions are now also accentuated within the Western world as the humanitarian situation in Gaza deteriorates.

Inside the European Union (EU), there are differences between the Twenty-Seven of this organization, regarding support for Israel's right to defend itself and concerns about the fate of Palestinian civilian populations.

This paper is divided into three substantive chapters. First, we will see the state of relations between the EU, Israel, and Palestine. Subsequently, part of this text will relate to Hamas. Subsequently, we will see the position of the EU in the war between Israel and Hamas in 2023.

1. State of relations between the EU, Israel, and Palestine: What relations does the EU have with Israel and Palestine?

The EU maintains important relations with both parties being Israel's largest trading partner and the world's largest donor of development aid to Palestine. [The EU is Israel's biggest trade partner, accounting for 28.8% of its trade in goods in 2022. 31.9% of Israel's imports came from the EU, and 25.6% of the country's exports went to the EU.](#)

The legal basis of relations between the EU and Israel is based on a recent major agreement entitled [the Israel-EU Association Agreement](#) which entered into force in June 2000. This one notably allows commercial exchanges within a free trade framework in several sectors, notably industrial and

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agricultural. Economic ties between the two sides are significant, with the EU being Israel's largest trading partner, with around a third of Israeli imports coming from the Twenty-Seven.

Israel is included in the [EU Neighborhood Policy](#), which aims to ensure good political and economic relations with member states' neighbors. Within this initiative, Israel is involved in [the Euromed Partnership](#), the section of the neighborhood policy intended for countries around the Mediterranean. In this context, young Israelis benefit, for example, from exchange programs with Europe. Alongside the Twenty-Seven but also Palestine and fourteen other countries, Israel is also a member of the [Union for the Mediterranean](#), an organization whose main objective is to strengthen the previously mentioned Euromed.

Cooperation between the EU and Israel also concerns the scientific field. The country participates in [Horizon Europe](#), an EU program for innovation and research with more than 95 billion euros for the period 2021-2027. Since 2013, Israel is also a stakeholder in [the EU spatial program named Galileo](#). Finally, wishing to reduce its dependence on Russian fossil fuels after the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU has also approached the Jewish state with the aim of increasing its gas imports from the country (Zielińska 2022).

Within the EU, the approaches of member states regarding Palestine, [an observer country at the UN since 2012](#), differ significantly. Particularly from the point of view of diplomatic recognition of the State. Nine countries among the Twenty-Seven, most often in central and eastern Europe, recognize Palestine. A legacy of their communist past, the USSR and its satellite states have positioned themselves in favor of the Palestinian camp. [For the period 2021-2024, 1.117 billion euros are planned by the EU for the Palestinians.](#)

Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary have established diplomatic relations with Palestine, as have Sweden, Cyprus and Malta. If the first group of countries had initiated them during the Cold War, some of them, [the Czech Republic in particular](#), are today among the most fervent supporters of Israel within the EU.

2. The position of the Hamas in the relations between Palestine and Israel

Hamas, considered primarily responsible for the conflict against Israel, is a group that was founded in 1987 and is considered as [a terrorist organization by the EU and the United States](#). Hamas defines historic Palestine, including today's Israel, as an Arab and Muslim land, excluding any lasting peace with the Jewish state. In 2017, the group officially accepted the creation of an interim Palestinian state in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the so-called pre-1967 war borders.

Since the late 1980s, the group has vowed to annihilate Israel and has been responsible for numerous suicide bombings and other deadly attacks against Israeli civilians and soldiers.

Since 2005, when Israel withdrew its troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip, Hamas has become involved in the Palestinian political process. [In 2006, the group won elections to the Palestinian Authority's legislative bodies](#), and the following year it consolidated its power in the Gaza Strip, displacing rival Fatah, led by Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the state of Palestine.

Since then, Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip have experienced four major armed conflicts with Israel. [In 2014, more than 2,250 Palestinians, including 1,462 civilians, as well as 67 Israeli soldiers and six civilians, were killed during 50 days of fighting.](#) During the 11 days of conflict in 2021, at least 256

people have been killed in the Gaza Strip and 13 in Israel. [Hamas' main financial and political sponsor is Qatar, which has provided around \\$500 million on a yearly basis](#) to pay for electricity, reconstruction of infrastructure and salaries of civil [servants](#) in Gaza. and also supports Hamas by imparting knowledge on producing rockets and organizing attacks.

Hamas also maintains good relations with Russia. The group's leaders have been received in Moscow several times since 2006, the last time in March this year. According to many commentators, by openly supporting Hamas, [Russia is challenging the traditional role of the United States as a mediator between Israelis and Palestinians](#). Moscow is trying to “instrumentalize this situation to feed a narrative against the EU.

3. [European reactions to the Israel-Hamas war of 2023](#)

Emotion gripped Europe after the deadliest Hamas attack on Israel since the country's creation in 1948, which caused the deaths of at least 1,400 people. A shock that pushed European leaders to denounce the barbaric attack on October 7 and to support the right of Israelis to defend themselves. Three days later, the Twenty-Seven members of the EU established a common position: this was intended to be balanced between unwavering support for Israel and the demand that the Jewish state – a democracy – respect international and humanitarian law, and spare civilians. in Gaza, which Israel has besieged and bombarded since October 8, at the cost of more than 3,000 victims. [After the untimely announcement of a blockage of development aid paid by the EU to the Palestinians, followed by a sudden reversal, the confusion continued with the lone rider of Ursula von der Leyen.](#)

On Thursday October 19, [a resolution of the EU Parliament expressing the concerns relating to the conflict between Hamas and Israel](#) was finally voted. Recognizing Israel's right to self-defense, Members of the European Parliament call for “eliminating the terrorist organization Hamas”, which rules the Gaza Strip and which launched an unprecedented wave of attacks against the Israeli civilian population on October 7.

At the same time, [MEP ask Israel to act in accordance with international humanitarian law in Gaza](#), where the situation of residents has deteriorated significantly. Parliament stressed that Hamas attacks and the Israeli reaction risk reinforcing a cycle of violence in the region. In their resolution, the deputies call for a “humanitarian pause” in the fighting and an increase in international aid to the civilian population of the region. The MEP also reiterated their support for a two-state solution to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This position angered not only many Member States, but also the EU High Representative, Josep Borrell, and the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, who, according to the EU Treaty, defines the Union's foreign policy. To put an end to the cacophony, the twenty-seven heads of state and government recalled, Tuesday, October 17 during an exceptional European Council, their common position, which strongly supports "Israel's right to defend itself in accordance with humanitarian law and international law. [EU heads of state and government sought to articulate a common line and send a balanced message in the midst of the war between Israel and Hamas.](#) All countries agree on Israel's right to protect its sovereign territory and its population, however Ursula von der Leyen's repeated omissions on the need to respect international law.

Any relative lack of interest in the war in Ukraine ultimately means less aid, less attention, and less public pressure. At the same time, Russia is struggling to maintain the delicate balance it has more or less managed to maintain so far between Israel, where many Russians who have become Israeli citizens reside,; the Palestinians, who enjoy traditional support from Russian diplomacy; Syria, where the Russians maintain two military bases and Iran, with which particularly military ties have become closer in the context of the Russian invasion over Ukraine.

Findings and Implications on EU Foreign Policy

Conflicts between Israel and Hamas have long caused divisions within the EU, even though it supports a two-state solution. The community tries to find a consensus and is therefore obliged to consider the different points of view of its 27 members. France, the Nordic countries, Belgium, and Ireland traditionally support a position that some other countries consider too pro-Palestinian.

These first reactions highlight the diversity and evolution of the relationship of Europeans to Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while the peace process and the objective of a two-state solution, which Europe has supported for more than thirty years, are at a standstill. Israel's war against Hamas could extend to Europe; terrorists could radicalize Muslim communities in the Old Continent.

The policy of the EU in the context of the war between Israel and Hamas will depend on several factors. First, the duration of the conflict. If it drags on, we can already wonder whether the EU will continue to distribute funds to the Palestinian government because of the fear that these sums of money will be misappropriated by Hamas leaders. Second point: the internationalization of the conflict. Iran's position is well known on the question of Palestine: Teheran supports Hamas. If Iranian forces intervene in the conflict, EU relations with this country will also be blocked, which could lead to a new embargo on this Shiite country. Finally, one question remains. Will the EU be able to pursue an independent policy free from all American influences? The answer is not obvious, because, despite everything, the EU is aligning itself with the American position and is participating in the polarization of world geopolitical forces, at least as far as the Middle East is concerned. This Middle East issue may have a new outcome with the results of EU Parliamentary elections which will take place in June 2024. s

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