

Balancing Defence and Neutrality: Ireland's Foreign Policy and the Middle East

Article by Ben Ryan

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Ireland, a prosperous EU state with a history of colonial rule and emancipation, sits in a partial yet vigilant position on the conflict between Israel and Palestine. How can the country and its diaspora, especially in the US, best relate its experiences of fighting violence and peacebuilding in a global arena?

When Hamas attacked Israel on 7 October, Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing government received broad Western support. Ireland, while also acknowledging Israel's right to defend its people, as a long-term vocal critic of the Israeli treatment of Palestinians, remains a political outlier in Europe. Its affinity with Palestine is a reflection of the Irish experience of British colonialism and sectarian violence, particularly during the revolutionary period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In contrast, Ireland also has a lesser-known history with early Zionism and the burgeoning Israeli state, epitomised by two central figures: Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog and Yitzhak Shamir. Herzog was the first Chief Rabbi of Ireland, known as the "Sinn Féin Rabbi" due to his fluency in Irish and support for the Irish Republican Army (IRA) during the Irish War of Independence. In the 1930s he moved to British Mandate for Palestine territory to become the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi for the region. He was the father of Chaim Herzog, the sixth president of Israel, and grandfather of Isaac Herzog, the current Israeli president.

Shamir was the seventh prime minister of Israel and leader of the Zionist paramilitary group Lehi. During the 1940s Shamir sought to emulate the Irish Republicans' anti-British struggle, replicating their military tactics and taking after Irish Republican leader Michael Collins.

Ireland was also one of the first countries to recognise the State of Israel upon its creation in 1948. Diplomatic relations between Ireland and Israel were established in 1975, yet Ireland's stance towards Israel has gradually shifted due to concerns for Palestine.

Since the deployment of Irish Defence Forces in 1958 with the United Nations Observer Group in Lebanon (UNOGIL) to observe the Lebanon-Israel border, Ireland's presence in the region has been ongoing. In October 1973 Irish infantry soldiers stationed in Cyprus were moved to the Second United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF II) in the Sinai to supervise the ceasefire between Israel and Egypt after the Yom Kippur War. Ireland's longest-running commitment to an international peacekeeping force started with the establishment of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL): Ireland has deployed personnel to UNIFIL since 1978; over 30,000 Irish personnel have served to date.

European foreign policy, defence, and neutrality

On 10 May 1972, 82 per cent of Irish voters approved membership of the European Economic Community. Since then, Ireland has continued to be one of the strongest supporters of the European Union with 88 per cent approval of Irish-EU membership. However, the country often finds itself at odds with the foreign policies and geopolitical positions of many other EU member states.

Ireland has remained militarily neutral throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. It isn't a member of NATO nor of the Non-Aligned Movement. However, the country has taken sides in certain conflicts through allied action: British pilots who were forced to land in Ireland due to harsh weather conditions and poor navigational equipment during World War II, for example, were interned but then repatriated via Northern Ireland to England.

This mix of neutrality and an engaged foreign policy, which has further evolved in recent decades, has become a hotly contested issue within national political debate. Since the turn of the century, Ireland's two largest political parties, Fine Gael (a member party of the centre-right EPP) and, to a lesser extent, Fianna Fáil (a member party of liberal ALDE), have been in favour of increasing the country's participation in European Defence and Foreign Policy projects such as EU Battlegroups and PESCO. In 2022 Fine Gael's leader, Leo Varadkar, the then deputy prime minister, stated that, although not militarily aligned, Ireland is "not neutral at all" regarding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and that "our support for Ukraine is unwavering and unconditional". Humanitarian aid donations and asylum for Ukrainians are testament to this: Ireland has taken in the 5th highest number of refugees proportional to its population in the EU.

The debate sharpened when centre-right Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil entered a coalition with the Green Party. Disagreements on defence and foreign policy have led to increased pressure on the Green Party, caught in the middle between its government partners, who would prefer increased EU cooperation, and most opposition parties and Irish people who support the retention of Ireland's current model of neutrality. This support comes with a caveat, however: an increasing number of people want to see a significant increase in Ireland's defence capacity, which is considered to be "without a credible military capability to protect ... its people and its resources for any sustained period".

At odds with political allies

Whilst there was never a question of Irish military intervention in the Israel-Hamas war, defence is the lens through which Irish geopolitical interactions with the wider world are viewed. Whilst Ireland is pro-EU, it is also a country which has experienced centuries of colonial oppression, forced migration, and, arguably, in the context of the Irish Potato Famine, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

This can put Ireland at odds with those EU states that were colonial empires and in good grace with states that have also experienced oppression. As a country that straddles being a high-income Western EU state with a dark history of colonial subjugation, Ireland occupies a unique position, contributing to the perception that it can punch far above its weight in international diplomacy. This is further aided by its sprawling diaspora of more than 70 million people who claim Irish heritage.

It even puts the Irish Green Party at odds with its counterparts across Europe. Despite the Greens generally concurring on topics due to the transnational coherence of the Green political ideology, the positions of national parties on the Israel-Hamas conflict are very different. Whilst all European Green parties agree that islamophobia and anti-Semitism are wrong, and that there needs to be a ceasefire and resumption of peace negotiations, that's largely where agreement ends.

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Positions are nuanced due to the historical and geo-political contexts of different countries. Typically,

Ireland, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Spain are the most pro-Palestinian, and, at the other end of the spectrum, Germany is very pro-Israeli. Due to its relative size and influence, the German Green Party often has a significant role in setting overall policy and political positions.

Overall, the EU has generally lacked a coordinated, proactive, and nuanced approach to key geopolitical issues, but the stark divisions in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict are in marked contrast to the incremental consensus building between EU member states on Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Demonstrating affiliation

Ireland is one of the most vocally pro-Palestinian nations in the EU and has been for decades. It was the first EU member to support the establishment of a Palestinian state in 1980. Irish politicians met with Yasser Arafat, the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, between 1999 and 2003. In 2010 Ireland expelled an Israeli diplomat from Dublin after linking forged Irish passports to suspects in the assassination of Hamas official Mahmoud al-Mabhouh. That same year Israeli security forces intercepted the MV Rachel Corrie, an Irish ship, carrying humanitarian aid for Gaza, named after the American activist killed by an Israeli armoured bulldozer.

In 2017 Dublin City Hall flew the Palestinian flag to acknowledge 50 years of Israeli occupation in the West Bank. In 2018 Ireland made international headlines when the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill passed its first stages in both the lower house of parliament, the Dáil, and the upper house, the Seanad; Fine Gael has stalled the bill ever since.

Whilst actions such as these have led to Ireland being dubbed the "most anti-Israeli country in Europe", with some even going as far as to accuse Ireland of being anti-semitic, Ireland's Minister of Foreign Affairs Micheál Martin vouched that "criticism of Israeli government policy is not anti-Semitism". Given Ireland's history, its people tend to rally behind those they see as marginalised, particularly those with suppressed national identities within the contexts of imperialism and colonialism.

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Several incidents with the Israeli Embassy in Ireland have exacerbated these tensions. Shortly after Hamas's attack in October, an Israeli diplomat based in the embassy tweeted: "#Ireland Wondering who funded those tunnels of terror? A short investigation direction – 1. Find a mirror 2. Direct it to yourself 3. Voilà." After a huge outcry, the tweet was deleted, and the Israeli Embassy clarified that "the text and wording were wrong".

Ursula von der Leyen's blatant expressions of support for Israel jarred with Ireland as not only being biased but also beyond her mandate. She was subsequently criticised by the Irish taoiseach (prime minister), Leo Varadkar, who said some of her comments "lacked balance". This was further compounded by the Irish president's remarks that von der Leyen was "not speaking for Ireland and she wasn't speaking for the opinions that they hold".

Whilst internal fighting has largely curbed the EU's course of action on the conflict, UN Secretary-

General António Guterres's response has been determined. He took the highly unusual step of writing a letter to the UN Security Council under Article 99 of the UN Charter, calling on the council to "press to avert a humanitarian catastrophe" in Gaza, appealing for a humanitarian ceasefire.

Due to international and domestic pressure, the US's position of unconditional support for Israel is slowly changing. Since Israel's retaliation to the 7 October attack, Irish politicians have been under pressure to act on the country's unique relationship with the US and help prevent further death and destruction in Palestine. Many in Ireland are uncomfortable with President Biden, who leans heavily on his Irish roots, being staunchly pro-Israeli.

The affinity that Irish people feel with Palestinians won't be going away anytime soon. To many, the EU's active response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine versus a hands-off approach to Israeli violence against Palestine is hypocritical. They feel that more should be done, but the Irish government, particularly Fine Gael, fear taking actions that might overstep the position of other EU pro-Palestine voices, potentially losing its influence in pushing for a ceasefire and more permanent peace talks.

Sinn Féin's rise and influence

Despite its history of resistance, Sinn Féin has been reluctant to alienate US politicians and businesses that are key backers of Israel. Links with the Irish-American community in Washington and the wider US have been carefully cultivated since the 1990s, when US support helped create the conditions for the Good Friday Agreement and an end to the Troubles in Northern Ireland. For years Sinn Féin has built a support base, both political and financial, throughout the US, using these connections to help the party pivot away from IRA bloodshed towards establishing a legitimate political party in Northern Ireland and especially in the Republic of Ireland.

One of the key criticisms from establishment politicians for decades has been that IRA military control structures live on secretly within the party and that decisions are made by shadowy, unelected figures. Judgements aside, examples of Sinn Féin dramatically changing its position overnight exist which don't help to alleviate this criticism. While the opposition party had been calling for the Israeli Ambassador's expulsion, Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland abstained from a motion on the matter in Belfast City Council on 1 November. Two days later Sinn Féin's president, Mary Lou McDonald, announced that the Israeli Ambassador should "no longer enjoy diplomatic status in Ireland" and the following week the party supported a Social Democrats motion in the Dáil to expel the ambassador.

With local, European, and national elections looming, in which Sinn Féin is polling at almost the combined level of the incumbent government parties, the possibility of policy changes in the near future is growing. This could take the form of a rear-guard action by Fine Gael and Fianna Fail, aiming to claw back some support from Sinn Féin. But, as it looks increasingly likely that Sinn Féin will be the major party in the next government, it will want to leave its mark. So far, the opposition has been promising all things to all people, pushing a message of "radical change but only to the things you don't like". As the party comes closer and closer to the actual levers of power, it will be interesting to see how it implements these promises.

Emancipation and peacebuilding

The European identity is a summation of a variety of historic, cultural, religious, political, and linguistic factors, and, as a result, highly nuanced, subjective, and complicated – as is the case for all other mass identities. However, the European identity encompasses many people who have opposing lived or

historic experiences: the colonised and the coloniser; the very religious and the highly secular; polyglots and monolinguals; monarchies, republics, and federations. Rather than viewing Europe on a black-and-white, majority-rule basis, we should instead seek to use the richness of our shared experiences to inform European positions, following the examples of emancipation and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, shared governance structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Parliament of the German-speaking Community in Belgium, and so on. The richness of European historical experiences is a precious resource that should inform Europe's position vis-à-vis the rest of the world.

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Henry Kissinger's line "Who do I call when I want to talk to Europe?" is often used as an example of why EU foreign policy doesn't work. I would argue that this is instead a positive point. Europe is not a majoritarian super state and shouldn't have one standardised view to represent the almost 500 million people in it. It is a densely populated area with a multitude of different identities, views, and experiences, and it should reflect that. However, European identity is grounded in values of inclusion, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and non-discrimination. These are cornerstones of the EU's collective community of nation states and individuals.

Whilst EU foreign policy positions are often paralysed due to national politics, we should strive to progress the values on which we all agree; these values should be something afforded to all Palestinians and Israelis, whether Muslims, Jews, Christians, or those from other denominations. This is what EU identity and foreign policy should be about – to push for the adoption and upholding of these values when many others don't.



Ben Ryan is originally from Ireland and has worked in Green politics both at an EU and national level. He has an academic background in international development, governance, and food policy. He is interested in issues related to climate change, geopolitics, and international relations.

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