

The EU Needs to Address its Inconsistent Middle East Foreign Policy

Article by Raluca Besliu

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In the wake of the Israel-Palestine crisis, the EU has struggled to overcome its internal divisions to respond effectively. To remain relevant in the Middle East, the EU must carve out a foreign policy that is united, independent from the US, and aligned with its core values.

On 13 October 2023, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, alongside European Parliament President Roberta Metsola, visited Israel to, express solidarity following Hamas's horrific terrorist attacks. She highlighted Israel's right to defend itself, stressing that "how Israel will respond will show that it is a democracy."

This statement seemed to ignore both the fact that Israel is led by a far-right government with increasingly authoritarian tendencies, contested by Israeli protesters since January 2023, and that it had been bombing Gaza since 7 October 2023, killing thousands of innocent Palestinian civilians and displacing thousands more.

On October 14, von der Leyen adjusted her stance. She maintained support for Israel's right to defend itself, but stressed the importance of adhering to "international humanitarian law", while also expressing support for Gaza's innocent civilians.

This shift aligned with the EU foreign affairs ministers' position on October 10, which condemned Hamas' attacks, while calling 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."

Her change in rhetoric underscores an uncoordinated EU response to the Israel-Palestine crisis as well as a wavering commitment to the EU's core values of rule of law and human rights.

There is one aspect where von der Leyen and the EU foreign affairs ministers found alignment from the beginning: their reluctance to call out Israel's violations of international law against Palestinians which are well documented by human rights groups like Amnesty International.

These violations include bombing civilian buildings, including by using white phosphorus, blockading Gaza, and ordering the evacuation of over one million civilians with no safety measures in place. While EU leaders remained silent on Israel's actions, citizens mobilised a wave of protests in the Netherlands, Ireland, France, Spain, and Greece, to denounce these abuses and express solidarity with the people of Palestine.

The EU's refusal to hold its ally accountable reveals a hesitance at the highest political level to acknowledge the complexity of the situation. Israel's reaction to Hamas's shocking attack should not result in an indiscriminate military retaliation and the collective punishment of Palestinians. Instead of addressing the root causes of the current Palestinian suffering, the EU is mainly channelling its efforts

into funding humanitarian aid in Gaza.

The EU's response to this crisis reflects a broader issue: its inconsistent Middle Eastern foreign policy for the past decades.

The US has historically held sway in the Middle East, often with EU backing, notwithstanding certain disagreements. As the US scales back its involvement, China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, among others, are stepping up. The EU must define its role in this shifting landscape.

Many frameworks, no strategy

Despite the Middle East's geographical proximity and strategic importance for the Union, including due to its oil resources, the EU has yet to develop a comprehensive Middle East strategy, unlike the one for other regions like the Sahel (2021) and Central Asia (2019), which have even undergone revisions and updates.

Beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the EU has often lacked a coordinated, proactive, and nuanced approach to key geopolitical issues, such as the Syrian civil war. This inconsistency is rooted in the absence of a cohesive Middle East strategy and exacerbated by the paralysing unanimity rule for EU foreign policy decisions. Frequent divisions on Middle Eastern issues, often between Western and Eastern European Member States, present a major challenge. One dissenting voice can block collective action.

Although getting member states to agree will be challenging, a unified strategy would clarify the EU's objectives, interests, and position in relation Middle Eastern countries and other regional actors.

While lacking an overarching strategy, the EU uses other frameworks and mechanisms to collaborate in the Middle East. One of the main ones is the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), focused on encouraging political and economic reform in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region's countries.

The ENP has been criticised by regional experts for its top-down approach, where the EU aimed to impose its values of democracy, rule of law, and a free market economy on MENA partners without sufficient consultation and understanding their perspectives. While undergoing several rounds of revisions, the ENP's strategies have "largely failed to convince regional audiences."

Since the ENP was started in 2004, little improvement has been seen in the region. It is now more fragmented than ever. The countries that underwent revolutions remain in turmoil, while the ongoing Syrian war poses a continuous threat to the stability of nearby Lebanon and Jordan.

While these issues have deep structural roots, the EU still has the potential to foster improvements, by revising its frameworks to establish genuine partnerships with MENA countries and developing a Middle Eastern policy.

However, the EU's one-sided support for Israel in the ongoing conflict could undermine further the credibility of the EU's commitment to establish genuine partnerships in the eyes of MENA countries.

Shaky approach on MEPP

Apart from its own frameworks, the EU is also involved in international initiatives, such as the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), a UN-coordinated diplomatic effort to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The EU officially advocates for a two-state solution with Jerusalem as the future capital for both

states and for solving issues like Israeli settlements in accordance with international law.

Despite the EU countries' apparent alignment, divisions have emerged, such as in 2020, when several EU states supported former US President Donald Trump's "deal of the century." It granted extensive territory to Israel, allowing it to maintain all of its West Bank settlements, annex the Jordan Valley, and assert control over Jerusalem, resulting in a fragmented Palestinian state.

Efforts to issue a joint EU statement opposing Trump's deal faced resistance from six member states, including Italy, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, due to the unanimity requirement. Trump's plan was still never implemented, with the Palestinians rejecting it.

In 2021, amid escalating violence triggered by Israeli settlers' attempts to forcibly evict Palestinians from a Jerusalem neighbourhood, the EU struggled to call for an Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire, as Hungary vetoed the proposal.

The unanimity rule, already contested at the EU level, has given dissenting voices the power to undermine the Union's position on MEPP, while casting doubt on its future effectiveness in dealing with other Middle East issues. Moving to qualified majority would allow the EU to more quickly and resolutely make decisions.

US' decreasing presence and rising actors

Despite some notable disagreements, such as during the US' invasion of Iraq and the more recent Iranian nuclear deal negotiations, the EU closely cooperated and often followed the US in the Middle East, especially on security matters, for decades. Even when the US started taking a step back from the region, the EU still struggled to act independently in a cohesive manner due to differing Member States' positions.

A case in point is the Syrian conflict. When the US withdrew troops in 2019, EU Member States disagreed on how to support Syria's political transition. Some, like Austria, Hungary, and Poland, favoured reconstruction aid, while others, including France and Germany, insisted on waiting for a political transition before aiding reconstruction. This disagreement once again paralysed the EU's actions.

The US is currently in a period of relative retrenchment from the Middle East. This has included, among other things, withdrawing troops from Iraq and Afghanistan and reducing military presence in Syria and Yemen. This gives space for other actors, including the EU, to engage in the Middle East.

Some are seizing the opportunity. China, for instance, has been working to establish its power in the region, partly to meet its vast energy needs. In March 2023, China brokered a normalisation of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which is also striving to take a more dominant role in the region. The Saudi-Iran rift had added fuel to the war in Yemen, while also leading the two countries to take different sides in the conflicts in Syria and Lebanon.

To balance out China's move, the US accelerated discussions to normalise relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. A key talking point was the establishment of a Palestinian state. Despite being key actors in this process, the Palestinian Authority and Iran were not consulted. This lack of involvement may have contributed to the timing of Hamas' attacks on Israel.

If the EU held a stronger influence in the Middle East, it could have, at the very least, emphasised the

importance of involving these critical actors in the Saudi-Israeli discussions. The EU must recognise the stakes it has in the Middle East. As the US scales back its presence, the EU has an opportunity to carve its own distinct role in the region.

Beyond this crisis, the EU's role could be centred around green diplomacy, where the EU would provide financial and technical assistance to help countries address worsening climate and environmental issues and build a sustainable future. Yet, as long as internal divisions persist and common ground remains elusive, the EU's potential remains unrealised.

Regrettably, for the immediate crisis, this translates to a distressing reality: as innocent Israeli and Palestinian civilians continue to endure enormous atrocities, the EU is poised to remain fractured and ineffectual, lacking the nuanced approach needed to address such a complex and persistent issue.



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