

# From the Ashes of Europe to the Ashes of Gaza: Searching for the EU in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper reviews the EU's role in the conflict over Palestine, both prior to the October 7, 2023 attacks and since the start of the genocide. It documents European leaders' unwillingness or inability to act in accordance with the international legal order the EU purports to care about. Given the gravity of the crimes committed by a major European partner, this paper argues that the lack of appropriate reaction from the EU almost two years into the genocide subverts the European project to its core and deals a likely fatal blow to European global ambitions for the decades to come.*

## **TAGS:**

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Born in the ashes of the Second World War, the European Union (EU) aspires to be a force for good and, above all, a force for peace. The organization is informed by an obvious European ambition to exert a positive influence on the EU's Southern and Eastern neighbors and engage with the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region. Taken from its website, the **EU's policy on the Middle East and North Africa** "seeks to encourage political and economic reform in each individual country" as part of its European Neighbourhood Policy. It also seeks to encourage "regional cooperation among the countries of the region themselves and with the EU (Union for the Mediterranean)" The EU also plays a particular role in the "Middle East Peace process," professing to be "actively supporting efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." Moreover, it is a member of the Middle East Quartet (along with the United States, Russia and the UN).

The EU thereby expresses its readiness to engage with the Middle East in general and more particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This position can be partly explained by the role the EU aspires to play in the world, the geographic proximity of the Middle East, and the strong European representation in the world's most powerful international body, the UN Security Council. The fact that some prominent countries within the EU bear a historical responsibility for the creation of, and support for, the Israeli state, which was established to the detriment of Palestinians' own right to statehood, must also be taken into account when considering European engagement with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>1</sup>

This paper reviews the EU's role in the conflict over Palestine, both prior to the October 7, 2023 attacks and since the start of the genocide. It documents European leaders' unwillingness or inability to act in accordance with the international legal order the EU purports to care about. Given the gravity of the crimes committed by a major European partner, this paper argues that the lack of appropriate reaction from the EU almost two years into the genocide subverts the European project to its core and deals a likely fatal blow to European global ambitions for the decades to come.

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<sup>1</sup> As a former colonial power, the United Kingdom bears, of course, a particular responsibility that has significantly impacted the EU despite the recent Brexit. See notably Ilan Pappé, 'Historical R2P: Britain's Special Accountability,' in C. Pison Hindawi (ed), 'Palestine and R2P', *The Beirut Forum*, 2019, republished in *Security in Context*, 2023, <https://www.securityincontext.org/posts/historical-r2p-britains-special-accountability>, accessed 11.07.25.

## The EU Prior to October 7, 2023: Helping the Dispossessed to Meet Basic Needs, while Unconditionally Partnering with the Strong

In recent years, and decades prior to 2023, the EU has been a major donor of humanitarian and development aid to the Palestinians, while remaining an Israeli partner and ally.

The EU prides itself on being the largest international donor to the Palestinian people. It has provided close to 1.1 billion euros in humanitarian assistance since 2000, over 2.2 billion euros of development support between 2014 and 2020, and almost 1.2 billion euros in development support allocated for the 2021-2024 period.<sup>2</sup>

Over the same period, however, the EU has enhanced its collaboration with Israel as a major commercial and strategic partner, thanks to the establishment of a so-called Association Agreement between the EU and Israel, applied since 1996 and in force since 2000. The agreement allowed for the establishment of a free trade area, along with a strengthened cooperation in various economic sectors such as research and technology, and political sectors. Although US military assistance is what enables Israel to have "*one of the most technologically sophisticated militaries in the world*,"<sup>3</sup> the role played by the EU is also significant.

Israel's military industry is strong in its own right. There are three Israeli companies in the top 100 arms-producing and military services companies worldwide - Elbit Systems, Israel Aerospace Industries and Rafael, **which ranked respectively 24th, 35th and 42nd in 2023. All three companies** have seen their revenue increase by 6.5% between 2021 and 2022. As of 2023, they represented 2.1% share of global arms revenue: a massive share for a country the size of Israel. Israel was the 10th largest exporter of arms for the 2018-2022 period, providing weapons to large numbers of countries worldwide, most significantly to India, but also (in decreasing order of significance) to the United States, Turkey, Singapore and Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> As of 2023, the United Kingdom was also a recipient of

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<sup>2</sup> EU Support to Palestinians - Factsheet - May 2024, [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/middle-east-crisis\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/middle-east-crisis_en), accessed on 10.06.2024.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Sharp, "U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel," *Congressional Research Service*, 01.03.23, p. 2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33222/49>, accessed 28.01.24.

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<https://www.sipri.org/research/armament-and-disarmament/arms-and-military-expenditure/international-arms-transfers>, accessed on 26.01.24.

Israeli weapons and military services, alongside countries within the EU: Italy, Germany, and to a lesser extent, the Netherlands and Finland.<sup>5</sup>

Looking at arms transfers to Israel prior to 2023, two EU members – Germany and Italy – stand out as significant providers of arms to Israel.<sup>6</sup> These exports pale in comparison to the military sales and assistance delivered by the US to their Middle East ally as, by early 2023, the US had provided Israel with \$158 billion non-inflation adjusted dollars in foreign aid,<sup>7</sup> much of it as military assistance (most recently, **the U.S. pledged to provide \$38 billion in military aid from 2019 to 2028**). However, the strategic support to Israel provided by European countries and by the EU as a whole is not as insignificant as it may seem. The EU-Israel military relationship is characterized by less visible forms of partnership: mostly the joint production of military or dual use goods and indirect support to the Israeli military and military research through EU grants and research funds.<sup>8</sup>

Since Israel joined the European Research Area in 1995 as part of its Association Agreement with the EU, it has been able to apply for and receive European funding, which has underpinned generous European contributions to the Israeli military sector. During the 2007-2013 period, which covered the EU's FP7 funding program, **one in five security research contracts included an Israeli security partner**. Under Horizon 2020, the program that replaced FP7, **Israeli defense and security companies also benefited from EU funding and collaboration** opportunities: Elbit Systems and Israel Aerospace Industries notably received a combined total of \$15 million from the program. This, however, is only **a small portion of the \$1.45 billion** that Israeli companies and institutions received from the EU under Horizon 2020 – including to universities and research institutes, many of whom are deeply connected to the Israeli military sector.

This partnership has not continued unnoticed. EU direct and indirect support of the Israeli security and defense sector has been flagged as problematic for many years. Among many other actions, **a call** was issued in 2018 from over 150 civil society organizations throughout Europe to end EU funding to the Israeli arms industry.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.sipri.org/databases>, Israeli exports for the 2000-2023 period.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.sipri.org/databases>, Israeli imports for the 2000-2023 period

<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Sharp, "U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel," *Congressional Research Service*, 01.03.23, p. 2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33222/49>, accessed 28.01.24.

<sup>8</sup> Coralie Pison Hindawi, 'Selective Arms Flows and Arms Control: Producing Insecurity in the Middle East ... and Beyond', in L. Kamel (ed) *The Middle East: Thinking About and Beyond Security and Stability*, Peter Lang, 2019, pp. 55-62. On the specific cooperation with France, see Patrice Bouveret, "La coopération militaire et sécuritaire France-Israël," *Les cahiers de l'AFPS* n°28, May 2017.

Yet despite protests such as these, Israeli institutions and companies have continued to be deemed important and legitimate partners within the European research and arms sectors and to benefit from EU funding. According to investigative journalists from several European newspapers (*De Tijd* in Belgium, *Le Monde* in France and *Paper Trail Media* in Germany, along with the program *Follow the Money*), 1.11 billion euros went to Israeli partners under the 2021-2027 phase of Horizon Europe, an EU funding program for research and innovation. Although the bulk of the funding goes to the civil sector, some of the European funding goes to defense-related entities, such as Israel Aerospace Industries, which is involved in a theoretically nonmilitary hydrogen plane research project, and is a major supplier of the Israeli defense forces.

## The EU Since October 7, 2023: Sticking to Old Patterns against All Odds

The EU's reactions to the October 7, 2023 attack conducted by Palestinian armed groups have been unanimous, across institutions and member states. The European Commission, for instance, stated that it was "*unequivocally condemning, in the strongest possible terms, the violent and indiscriminate terrorist attacks across Israel carried out on 7 October 2023 by Hamas.*"<sup>9</sup> Similar statements were made across the Union, generally accompanied by statements affirming Israel's right to defend itself under international law.<sup>10</sup>

Although the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, warned as early as October 2023 that "*the way we will deal with the current dramatic events in Israel and Palestine will define the EU's credibility and global role for years to come,*" it took more than three months for the European Parliament to call for a permanent ceasefire. By that time, and by the EU Parliament's own account, over 23,000 Palestinians, including 10,000 children, 140 UN staff, at least 81 journalists, and over 600 medical workers and patients, had been killed, over 60,000 had been injured, and almost two million people displaced. Furthermore, 100% of Gaza's population were suffering from acute food insecurity, 26% of catastrophic hunger and starvation, and

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<sup>9</sup> Wording from the website of the European Commission, [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/middle-east-crisis\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/middle-east-crisis_en), accessed 03.01.2024.

<sup>10</sup> *Deutscher Bundestag - Olaf Scholz: Deutschland hat nur einen Platz, den Platz an der Seite Israels*, 13.10.23. The French president E. Macron stated that "Israel has the right to defend itself by eliminating terrorist groups, among them Hamas, through targeted actions but while preserving civilians." *Guerre Israël-Hamas : Emmanuel Macron appelle les Français à rester « unis pour porter un message de paix et de sécurité pour le Proche-Orient »*, *Le Monde*, 12.10.23, accessed 12.07.25.

two-thirds of hospitals in the Gaza Strip had been destroyed. The European Council waited two additional months before it finally agreed to call for "*an immediate humanitarian pause leading to a substantial cease-fire*" on 21 March 2024.

As for the European Commission, its website continued, as of late January 2024 to solely refer to and condemn the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack, adding that "*[i]n the aftermath of these attacks, it has become urgent to provide humanitarian aid to the civilians in Gaza who are also victims of Hamas' actions.*"<sup>11</sup> Reading these lines without any knowledge of the actual context, one could not guess that the "dire" humanitarian situation the Commission was referring to was the outcome of a systematic attack on civilians and civilian infrastructures conducted by the official army of a close EU state partner: an attack that all UN agencies, the ICRC and renowned NGOs soon recognized as likely war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and increasingly, genocide.<sup>12</sup> The human cost of the Israeli attacks even reached early on the dubious record of *surpassing in four months the total number of children killed in conflicts worldwide in four years*. While the Commission's website had been modified by mid-June 2024 to acknowledge the causal link between the Israeli military operation, its blockade of Gaza, and the humanitarian catastrophe in the territory, this acknowledgement was not accompanied by any formal denunciation or condemnation.

Overall, early European reactions to the "Middle East crisis" have highlighted divergences at the very top of the EU. Following the president of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen's first visit to Israel in October 2023, then-foreign policy chief Josep Borrell issued *a public reminder* that the EU's foreign policy is determined by its member states, not by the Commission or its president. Borrell, on the other hand, was, until his stepping down in late 2024, one of the most vocal and critical EU figures, constantly highlighting the stakes of the crisis and the need to resolve the contradiction between calls for civilians in Gaza to be protected and the fact that some European countries continued to provide arms to Israel. The *following statement* from February 2024 illustrates his stance:

*"Well, if you believe that too many people are being killed, maybe you should provide less arms in order to prevent so many people being killed. [...] Everybody goes to Tel Aviv, begging, 'Please don't do that, protect civilians, don't kill so many.' How many is too many? [...] But Netanyahu doesn't listen to anyone. They're going to evacuate.*

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<sup>11</sup> European Commission website, '*The Middle East crisis*', accessed on 13.06.2024.

<sup>12</sup> See for example *an early UN report*, *a report by Human Rights Watch from December 2023*, or the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territories Francesca Albanese assessing that there are "reasonable grounds" to believe that Israel is committing genocide, in the *report* she released in March 2024.

*Where? To the moon? Where are they going to evacuate these people? So if the international community believes that this is a slaughter, that too many people are being killed, maybe they have to think about the provision of arms. [...] It is a little bit contradictory to continue saying that there are 'too many people being killed, too many people being killed, please take care of people, please don't kill so many!' Stop saying please and [do] something."*

Yet the belated calls for a cease-fire and Borrell's vehement criticisms have not changed the overall EU role. Over a year and a half into what most human rights organizations and legal experts have progressively recognized amounts to genocide,<sup>13</sup> political and commercial relations between Israel and its European partners (including in the military sector) have not been affected much and European institutions still struggle to reconsider their traditional support for Israel.

After gradually increasing references to the "*unacceptable number of civilian casualties*" in Gaza and increased settler violence in the West Bank, over twenty months of bloodshed passed before the European Council issued clear demands explicitly naming Israel, on June 26, 2025.<sup>14</sup> This came after a review of the EU-Israel Association Agreement – launched in May 2025 at the request of seventeen member states led by the Netherlands – found "indications" that Israel breached its human rights obligations under Article 2 of the Association Agreement.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> In addition to the ICJ successive orders in the case of *South Africa v. Israel* of 29 December 2023 acknowledging that there was a plausible risk of genocide and to the 2024 report "*Anatomy of a Genocide*" from UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese, *Amnesty International* and *Human Rights Watch* endorsed the use of the term genocide following the publication of two thoroughly researched reports in the fall 2024. *Most genocide scholars* have reached the same conclusions.

<sup>14</sup> "The European Council calls on Israel to fully lift its blockade of Gaza, to allow immediate, unimpeded access and sustained distribution of humanitarian assistance at scale [...] and to enable the UN and its agencies, and humanitarian organisations, to work [...] Israel must fully comply with its obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law." European Council conclusions on the Middle East, 26 June 2025,

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/06/26/european-council-conclusions-on-the-middle-east/>, last accessed on 8.07.25.

<sup>15</sup> The review, conducted by the European External Action Service (EEAS), was sent to member states on 20 June 2025. The Netherlands initiated the demand, which was backed by Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Lithuania did not back the request for review, with Latvia adopting a "neutral" position. EU review indicates Israel breached human rights in Gaza, *Euronews*, 20.06.25, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/06/20/eu-review-indicates-israel-breached-human-rights-in-gaza>, last accessed on 8.07.25. It should be mentioned that Ireland and Spain had been asking for such a review since February 2024.



In early July 2025, although a complete suspension of the agreement was on the table, it was considered quite unlikely – as such a move requires a unanimous approval from all 27 EU member states. Even a partial suspension of the agreement's free trade provisions, which requires approval of the European Commission, appeared improbable. A partial suspension of certain provisions, however, related to research, technology, culture, or political dialogue would require a qualified majority and seemed within reach.

Tragically, at the time of writing, a month later, EU members had failed to agree on any of the ten countermeasures proposed to them, even on a partial suspension of access to European research funds and programs. Two of the largest EU countries, Germany and Italy, continued to argue they needed more time to make such a decision.

Instead, the EU negotiated an agreement with Israel aimed at securing a "significant" improvement of the aid delivery in Gaza. However, a report drafted in August 2025 by the EU's External Action Service acknowledged that, while Israel had taken some "notable positive" steps to improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza, it remained "very severe" and the scale of destruction "unprecedented." With famine raging in Gaza and an average of one hundred Palestinians killed on a daily basis, many of them while seeking aid, that was the least one could say.

### Searching for the EU in the Ashes of Gaza

*"I want to reassure you that Europe will always be on the side of humanity and of human rights," claimed Ursula von der Leyen in late October 2023, noting that the EU had tripled humanitarian aid to Gaza and (had been) organizing an air bridge to bring much needed support to the Palestinian people." In May 2025, the Commission announced a multiannual Comprehensive Support Programme worth 1,6 billion euros to foster Palestinian recovery and resilience.*

Yet despite such announcements and von der Leyen's claims, at the institutional level, the EU's signals have not been reassuring. One could expect, given the extreme breaches of international law since early October 2023, that an international partner as implicated and ostensibly attached to norms and responsibilities as the EU would have found the strength to break old patterns to uphold international law. At the time of writing, twenty-two months into the war, such a principled reaction has not yet come from Brussels, which could not even agree upon a partial suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement.



Questioned by European members of Parliament in June 2025, EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas again acknowledged the Union's limited ability to act. Pressed by lawmakers to take action, she reminded them that she could not speak or act as she would like to because she had to be *"the voice of 27 governments who need to agree on a common position."* She said: *"I know this will not go through, and then it will just show that we don't have a common position."* She added: *"and all of those who have spoken here, I recommend you, especially from those countries whose governments are representing a different view, put the pressure on the governments to really change the position."*

Some individual member states and dissenting groups within the European administration have adopted stronger positions, with Ireland and Spain at the forefront. A letter signed as early as October 2023 by 850 EU staff urged the EU Commission "to call, together with the leaders of the whole Union, for a ceasefire and for the protection of civilian life." Adding that: *"This is at the core of the EU's existence."* Similar demands for the immediate protection of civilians, cessation of the siege and of the bombings have also come from the streets of European cities with countless demonstrations throughout the Union despite serious attempts to curb the right to demonstrate in support of Palestinians in several countries. Civil society actions have been numerous and diverse, including European iterations of the "Stop Arming Israel" campaign behind citizens' efforts to unveil European firms' collaboration with Israel, legal actions against perpetrators and accomplices, boycott and divestment actions, and a myriad other initiatives, such as the Global March to Gaza or, at the time of writing, a series of parallel initiatives aiming to break the blockade of Gaza.

There is a tangible European component to these global efforts, and despite the limited coverage of mainstream European media, a growing unease amidst many European citizens towards their representatives' support for Israel. An internal, 35 pages-long, report drafted by the EU Special Representative for Human Rights and shared with EU officials in November 2024 was recently leaked in full. This document confirms that lawyers within the EU foreign service have also been doing their job and that European representatives have been reminded of basic facts and applicable international legal obligations.

Despite this knowledge, most prominent European officials and most EU member states' representatives have continued to stand stubbornly by their traditional Israeli partner. This inaction cannot be fully explained by the institutional weakness of the Union or the notorious difficulty of its member states to agree on foreign policy matters. Nor can European obedience to or dependence on the US fully explain their inability to react appropriately for over twenty-two months of unabated bloodshed and merciless

targeting of a trapped civilian population. Their response betrays the most fundamental rules that the EU and its members profess to care about so profoundly.

One of the most troubling dimensions of the enduring European support for an ally turned overtly genocidal is the way in which, throughout Europe, far-right parties maneuvered to absolve themselves of their antisemitic past by confusing the denunciation of Israeli crimes with a supposedly "new antisemitism" promoted by Muslim minorities for primarily communitarian, or identity-based reasons. What is more, this odd confusion has been widely disseminated by media outlets and political actors well beyond the far right, which is using this posturing to further its normalization strategy.<sup>16</sup> At the time of writing, close to two years into the genocide, and despite an official discourse growing increasingly critical of Israeli actions towards Palestinians, prominent European states continued to harshly repress civil society groups and citizens — notably anti-Zionist Jews — asking for more decisive action to stop the genocide. Journalists and social scientists have begun exploring this astonishing reversal of the very values supposedly at the heart of the European project,<sup>17</sup> while ongoing legal work reminds European and member states' representatives of their obligations in the face of genocide. Both European and national representatives have now been accused of complicity in Israel's war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

At the political level, the continued official European support for a partner engaged in a genocidal war against a largely defenseless population deals a heavy — likely fatal — blow to the European project. Born in the ashes of Europe, the European project now lies critically ill in the ashes of Gaza. Despite the protests that countless Europeans participate in, most European official leaders no longer seem to care about the fundamental norms and principles the Union proclaims to uphold. Short of an unlikely immediate, radical and lasting change of course from the Union and its member states, the global ambitions of the EU as we know it will be buried forever in Gaza.

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<sup>16</sup> As far as France is concerned, Mehdi Belmecheri-Rozental provides an outstanding analysis of this curiously successful process. But surely, it is in Germany that the portrayal of antisemitism as imported through Muslim minorities reaches its Orwellian apex...

<sup>17</sup> See for example in France the work of anthropologist Didier Fassin, *Une étrange défaite. Sur le consentement à l'écrasement de Gaza*, Paris, la Découverte, 2024 or journalist Meriem Laribi, *Ci-gît l'humanité. Gaza, le génocide et les médias*, Paris, Éditions Critiques, 2025.

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