

## COMMENTARY

# The Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Can the EU break the cycle of violence?



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***The recent 'Gaza conflict' between Israel and Hamas highlighted once again that it is time for the EU to take a more proactive role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It should devise and implement a plan with clear steps and aims anchored on building trust, changing perceptions, redesigning EU policies, and enhanced regional and transatlantic cooperation.***

The latest escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict took the international community by surprise. The events are a cautionary tale that, even though the conflict has been low on the international agenda in recent years, tensions continue to simmer, ready to boil over instantly. The international community must urgently double down on efforts to find a long-lasting, peaceful solution.

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## Beyond the short-term

Reaching a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas was an essential step, but what happens next is even more important. The underlying conditions for conflict persist and, if not addressed, a new escalation could flare up soon. At the same time, there are other issues that further complicate the picture.

First, the Israeli political scene has been dominated by deadlock in the past two years. Four elections did not manage to establish a stable government. The recent agreement to form a new governing coalition, confirmed by the Israeli parliament on 13 June, substantially changes the Israeli political scene. Benjamin Netanyahu, the former prime minister, has been ousted after 12 years in power.

Despite the fragility of the new coalition made up of eight parties from across the political spectrum, the new leadership could provide an opportunity for a renewed dialogue between the EU, the US and Israel. Given the variety of the political orientations of the governing parties, it is unsure how they will approach divisive issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Second, the indefinite postponement of the Palestinian legislative elections, initially scheduled for 22 May, together with the chronic challenges that the Palestinian Authority faces, such as the lack of economic growth, corruption, and weak public services, worsen the situation on the ground and have no solution in sight. The international community and the EU should pay more attention to these internal dynamics if they want to bring peace to the region.

## A test for the EU?

The EU, as most of the international community, was caught rather unprepared by the recent developments. Brussels' reaction was similar to past escalations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The same usual steps were taken: [statements](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/98261/israelpalestine-statement-spokesperson-latest-escalation_en) (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/98261/israelpalestine-statement-spokesperson-latest-escalation\_en) in reaction to the clashes, and [an informal meeting of the EU foreign affairs ministers](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/98670/informal-videoconference-foreign-affairs-ministers-israelpalestine-press-remarks-high_en) (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/98670/informal-videoconference-foreign-affairs-ministers-israelpalestine-press-remarks-high\_en) was called. The internal disagreements among EU member states on the conflict resurfaced, and a joint EU position was blocked by Hungary.

In his reaction following the informal meeting, EU High Representative Josep Borrell focused on the **accept & close** principle of finding a way forward and acknowledged the urgency for the EU to try and revive the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians.

## **An old problem – a new opportunity**

The Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) is still relevant for the EU, despite the lack of progress in the past years. And although the new '[Agenda for the Mediterranean](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_renewed_partnership_southern_neighbourhood.pdf) ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint\\_communication\\_renewed\\_partnership\\_southern\\_neighbourhood.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_renewed_partnership_southern_neighbourhood.pdf)), which outlines the Union's priorities for its Southern Neighbourhood, states that the EU should renew its efforts to find a solution for the conflict, it also fails to outline a concrete path forward.

The EU's earlier attempts to influence the peace process have fallen short – it always seems to go back to square one. Factors such as the complexity of the conflict, the lack of a long-term approach, together with differences among member states, have hampered concrete actions.

What could the EU do differently in the current context? There is no silver bullet. But there are steps the EU could take, as part of an all-encompassing, long-term plan, including possible courses of action and clear implementation goals.

## **An EU plan for the Middle East Peace Process**

A new EU plan to break the cycle of violence should be anchored on multiple concurring steps:

### ***Enhanced dialogue with the parties***

The EU's two-state solution policy has remained steady over the years and will continue to be the Union's core position on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. The EU should focus first on building trust with the two sides and change the current perception that Brussels is mostly an international actor that only provides trade opportunities, assistance, and development aid with no strings attached. Renewed dialogue with the two sides as well as engagement with all political actors and local civil society is key to unlock a new impetus for a lasting solution in the conflict.

The confirmation of a new governing coalition in Israel is an opportunity as it brings in new interlocutors and new dynamics. Leadership changes could contribute to laying a new foundation for dialogue. But this process will take time and should go ahead irrespective of who is in power on both sides.



### ***Rethink the current EU approach***

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Association Agreement, and reassessing Israel's participation in EU programmes such as Erasmus and Horizon Europe could go a long way to bring the parties to the table. This leverage can be turned into a set of positive and conditioned incentives ('more for more' or 'more under certain conditions' mechanisms) that might help change the behaviour of the two parties in areas such as the building of Israeli settlements, human rights protection, and capacity building of the Palestinian governance system.

The EU should also reassess its external assistance approach towards the Palestinians. The Union should continue to support the reform of the Palestinian governance system, but the financial aid provided should be conditioned upon the progress made and on the goals achieved. Otherwise, the circle of financial aid with little tangible results in the long term will continue.

### ***Regional dialogue***

Under Borrell's leadership, Sven Koopmans, EU Special Representative for the MEPP and the European External Action Service (EEAS), should have a more proactive role. Dialogue with regional actors such as Egypt, Jordan, or Qatar is essential in the overall process of exploring future solutions beyond the recent ceasefire. Some of these actors have a direct line to Hamas, the governing entity in the Gaza Strip, which the EU has designated as a terrorist organisation and has a no-contact policy with. The EEAS could show its added value by creating a framework of multilateral discussions that would include regional actors and aim to also bring the two parties to the negotiating table. As shown by the Iran nuclear deal, the EU is capable of building successful diplomatic frameworks.

### ***Transatlantic cooperation***

On the international stage, the Biden administration has opened up a new window to enhance transatlantic cooperation in the region. The way forward should encompass a bilateral dialogue between the EU and the US to forge a better understanding of their respective policies towards MEPP and to discuss and coordinate next steps from both sides. With a clear plan towards the peace process, the EU will signal to the US that it is committed to being more engaged and ready to enhance US-EU cooperation in this regard.

A new push to reach a solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is required and the EU should make the first move regardless of who holds the political leadership positions, either in Israel or in the Palestinian Authority. The EU has the tools it needs to make a difference. It should devise a concrete plan for the peace process, which is based on building trust, changing perceptions, and bringing regional dialogue, redesigning EU policies, and upgrading transatlantic cooperation. Only a long-term commitment to this plan, together with political will, can bring the meaningful change needed to find a long-lasting

solution to the conflict.

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