

The EU's policy towards the Middle East Peace Process

By Clara Marina O'Donnell

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Since the beginnings of EU foreign policy co-operation, the Union has sought a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This objective is of significant interest to the United Kingdom.

How does the EU add value?

The EU provides large sums of humanitarian and development assistance to different countries in the Middle East. The EU is notably the largest donor to the Palestinians – according to EU figures, in recent years, the European Commission and member-states have together provided around €0.5 billion annually. Some of the EU's development efforts – particularly in Gaza – have been undermined by military confrontations between Israelis and Palestinians, feuding between Hamas and Fatah and the unwillingness of the Quartet to engage with Hamas until the faction fulfils certain conditions. But EU aid has helped Palestinians to make some progress in developing government institutions – a central requirement of the two-state solution. And the EU's humanitarian assistance has helped minimise the spread of chaos in Gaza since 2006. For example, as highlighted by the European Commission's Directorate General for Humanitarian Aid, its food aid supported around 500,000 refugees in Gaza in 2008.

Through trade concessions, the EU provides its south eastern neighbours with access to the world's largest trading bloc. The EU also co-operates with countries along its southern periphery on transport and environment and it allows them to participate in its scientific research programmes. Such bilateral ties strengthen the potential for economic growth in the Middle East, and therefore help provide some stability to the region.

The EU has at times also played a helpful diplomatic role in the Middle East Peace Process. The Union has helped legitimise policies which were initially domestically controversial for other states. For example, in the Venice declaration, EU heads of state and government recognised the need to involve the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in the peace negotiations at a time when the PLO was viewed as a terrorist organisation by Israel and the US.

The comparative (dis)advantages of working through the EU

The Lisbon treaty has addressed some of the institutional inefficiencies which previously hampered EU efforts towards the Arab-Israeli conflict. But the EU's policy in the region remains hamstrung by the difficulties of reaching a political consensus amongst 27 countries which have different views on the Middle East Peace Process.

Even when the EU does agree on a common position, its message to local interlocutors is sometimes undermined

by the unwillingness of EU member-states – including the United Kingdom – to let the EU speak on their behalf. And at times, some EU countries break with the EU's official policy. For example, in July 2007, the foreign ministers of ten Mediterranean member-states wrote an open letter to Tony Blair declaring the failure of the Quartet's 2003 Roadmap peace plan. They did not consult the remaining members of the EU, and they broke the official EU line which argued that the

Roadmap remained the key instrument for guiding the peace process. Similarly, in September 2010, then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy criticised US attempts to revive the Middle East Peace Process and invited Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to Paris to hold peace talks. At the time, the official EU position was to support the US-led efforts.

The EU also struggles to play a significant diplomatic role in the Middle East Peace Process because Israel has been reluctant to trust the organisation. Despite the strong cultural affinity many Israelis feel for Europe, and improvements in EU-Israeli relations over the years, there is still a feeling that a number of EU states have a pro-Arab bias and are insensitive to Israel's security concerns.

Would a different division of EU and member-state competence produce a more effective policy?

The EU's principle challenge in the region is political. The best way for European governments to improve EU policy towards the Middle East Peace Process would be to more speedily reach common positions in response to developments in the region, and to allow EU representatives to liaise with local players on their behalf.

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Additional information

Further details on the EU's policy towards the Middle East Peace Process can be found in a CER policy brief of June 2009 from Clara Marina O'Donnell, 'The EU's approach to Israel and the Palestinians: A move in the right direction', <http://www.cer.org.uk/publications/archive/policy-brief/2009/eus-approach-israel-and-palestinians-move-right-direction>. See also a CER insight of January 2009 by Clara Marina O'Donnell, 'Gaza, Europe and empty gestures', <http://www.cer.org.uk/insights/gaza-europe-and-empty-gestures>. And a CER working paper from 2008 by Clara Marina O'Donnell, 'The EU, Israel and Hamas', http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/wp_820-1475.pdf

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