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**The Palestine–Israel Conflict and the Role of the European Union: Historical Context, Policy Dynamics, and Prospects for a Just Peace**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article interrogates the Palestine–Israel conflict through a multidimensional analytical framework integrating historical institutionalism, international legal norms, and EU foreign policy behavior as conceptualized within the literature on normative power and external governance. By situating the conflict within a longue durée trajectory of settler-colonial dynamics, territorial fragmentation, and asymmetric power relations, the study elucidates how structural conditions embedded since the Mandate period continue to shape contemporary governance modalities, security regimes, and displacement patterns. The analysis foregrounds the European Union’s role as a composite international actor whose policies are mediated by internal preference heterogeneity, institutional path dependencies, and the constraints of a consensus-based Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) architecture. Empirically, the article synthesizes EU diplomatic outputs, legal positions on occupation and settlement activity, aid disbursement patterns, and engagement within multilateral for a including the Quartet to assess the extent to which the EU functions as an effective norm entrepreneur or predominantly as a technocratic stabilizer within an entrenched conflict system. The findings suggest that while the EU exerts significant structural influence through financial governance mechanisms, regulatory differentiation, and human rights monitoring, its transformative impact is attenuated by exogenous power asymmetries most notably U.S. dominance in mediation and endogenous constraints on deploying coercive conditionality. The article concludes that enhancing EU efficacy requires a recalibration toward a rights-based, enforceable, and internally coherent strategy that operationalizes international humanitarian and human rights law not merely as discursive resources but as actionable policy instruments.*

**Keywords:** Palestine–Israel Conflict, European Union Foreign Policy, Occupation and Settlements, Multilateral Diplomacy

**Introduction**

The Palestine–Israel conflict constitutes one of the most deeply entrenched and structurally complex disputes in contemporary international politics. Emerging from a century-long interplay of competing nationalisms, settler-colonial dynamics, imperial legacies, and unresolved questions of sovereignty and self-determination, the conflict has evolved into a multilayered system of territorial fragmentation, protracted displacement, asymmetrical power relations, and cyclical violence. Its persistence has generated not only profound humanitarian consequences for Palestinians and long-term security anxieties for Israelis, but has also posed substantial challenges to the international legal order, including debates over occupation law, the right to self-defense, civilian protection, and the applicability of human rights frameworks under conditions of prolonged military control.

For the European Union (EU), the conflict holds unique historical, normative, and geopolitical significance. Europe's involvement is shaped by layers of historical responsibility from the legacies of European colonial administration during the British Mandate to the moral and political reverberations of the Second World War and the Holocaust and by contemporary strategic concerns such as regional stability, migration governance, counterterrorism, and energy security. The EU has long framed its engagement through the lens of multilateralism, conflict prevention, and adherence to international law. It is currently the largest donor to the Palestinians, a major trade partner of Israel, and a central actor in the Quartet on the Middle East. Yet despite these substantial assets, Europe's political influence remains limited, constrained by internal divisions, institutional complexities within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and the predominance of U.S.-led negotiation frameworks.

This article situates the EU's role within a broader analysis of the conflict's historical evolution and structural determinants. It critically engages with scholarly debates on normative power, external governance, and international legal accountability to assess the degree to which EU engagement has functioned as a stabilizing force, a promoter of rights-based governance, or a largely symbolic actor constrained by geopolitical and institutional forces. The introduction aims to frame the central inquiry of the paper: **to what extent can the EU translate its normative commitments and material capabilities into meaningful influence over the conflict's trajectory, and what structural obstacles limit the realization of this potential?**

By addressing this question, the study contributes to wider academic discussions on the role of non-hegemonic actors in asymmetric conflicts, the operationalization of international law in contested political environments, and the interplay between normative aspirations and power politics in EU external action. In doing so, it lays the foundation for a rigorous examination of the EU's historical, diplomatic, legal, and economic engagement with the Palestine–Israel conflict and assesses the prospects for the EU to play a more assertive and coherent role in advancing a just, sustainable, and legally grounded resolution.

### **Historical Context**

The origins of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict can be traced back to the 1880s when both Jewish and Arab populations challenged each other for the land renowned as Palestine at the time (Smooha, 2015). The situation became worse when the Balfour Declaration was issued in 1917, where Britain supported creating a "national home for Jews" in Palestine (Lederman, 2020). From the Arab's standpoint, this proclamation expressed a clear preference for the rights of the Jews rather than for those of the Arab population, which remained under their control and resulted in a chain of wars throughout the years. The following mandate of the

British on Palestine, instituted by the League of Nations in 1922, became another source of tension in the region because it supported the migration of Jews into the area (Hughes, 2009). The arrival of Jewish immigrants induced the population to move to new places; thus, the Arab community started having second thoughts about sharing their future with the Palestinian Jews (Munayer, 2001). While the Jewish people continued their resettlement plans, the Arabs only got more resistant to the presence of their people and to what they perceived as a threat to their land and rights; in 1947, the UN's Partition Plan that is to divide Palestine into separate state for Jews and Arabs (Slater, 2020). According to this plan, Jerusalem is an international city. The plan was agreed upon by Jewish leaders who had been consulting, but the Arabs foresaw the partition as unfairly giving the Jews and not taking into consideration their concerns. This was a turning point towards the 1948-49 Israeli-Arab war, which erupted one year after the Israeli declaration of independence (Golani, 2010). As a result of the war, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced, and Israel got its state. This was a significant step in the rise of conflict.<sup>1</sup>

### **Current Issue**

The Israel-Palestine conflict has been the primary source of the continuing tensions and violence in the Middle East and remains one of the hotspots of the region. The matter has come to a worse situation with the use of aerial campaigns and ground operations within the Gaza Strip and, in particular, Rafah city (Jaber & Bantekas, 2023). These military actions are probably due to the fact that they belong to the Israeli response to a hostage situation that started in October 2023 when the kidnappers took hostages. So far, these efforts to secure the release of the hostages have not been successful. The fatalities record in Gaza make a heartbreaking and unbelievable sign, and the reports mean around 34,000 casualties (Center for Preventative Action, 2024). That figure is not only a direct measure of the immediate human sacrifices of this conflict but also demonstrates a major long-term humanitarian problem that this part of the world is facing. The tremendous rate of losses caused by the war extends far beyond the war zone, drawing the sympathies of neighbouring countries and the international community that are concerned about the situation (Masudi, 2023). The Israeli army has been criticized regarding the strategy it uses, with some observers doubting if the present approach is suitable for the long term. Interior affairs in Israel are now under investigation by the State Comptroller of Israel to expose intelligence wrongdoings before the attack last October 7 by Hamas, thus quelling internal worries of the army on IDF's preparedness and response (Kubovich, 2024). Abroad, there have been attempts to persuade the parties to stop hostilities and to negotiate in good faith again. The United States, which has been instrumental in the region, has brought to the table a \$1 billion weapons deal for Israel, a decision that aroused the curiosity of many about how the US is taking a side and not aiming for peace (The Associated Press, 2024). Approval of the White House that a possible operation led by Israel close to Rafah, the town in Southern Gaza, is a huge mistake, and the US administration is nevertheless trying to reach a truce.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Waqar Ahmed, Anila Sheikh, Sheikh Waleed Rasool, *Navigating the Israel-Palestine Conflict: Historical Roots, Current Dynamics, and Pathways to Peace*, Journal of Xi'an Shiyou University, Natural Science Edition ISSN: 1673-064X, VOLUME 20 ISSUE 06 JUNE 2024, pp2

<sup>2</sup> Waqar Ahmed, Anila Sheikh, Sheikh Waleed Rasool, *Navigating the Israel-Palestine Conflict: Historical Roots, Current Dynamics, and Pathways to Peace*, Journal of Xi'an Shiyou University, Natural Science Edition ISSN: 1673-064X, VOLUME 20 ISSUE 06 JUNE 2024, pp3

## Core Issues in the Contemporary Conflict

### Territory and Settlements

By the end of 2024, there were 503,732 Israeli settlers in the West Bank and 233,600 in East Jerusalem, totalling 737,332 Israeli settlers across 147 settlements and 224 outposts in the occupied West Bank<sup>1</sup>. This represents a substantial settler population that has grown significantly since Israel began its settlement enterprise in 1967. The scale of settlement development becomes evident when examining construction patterns in East Jerusalem, where Israeli authorities have initiated the construction of 57,000 housing units for Jewish neighbourhoods compared to only 600 housing units for Palestinian neighbourhoods since 1967<sup>2</sup>. During 2024, 28,872 housing units were advanced through different stages of planning and implementation across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Of these, 18,988 units were designated for settlements in occupied East Jerusalem while 9,884 units were planned for settlements in other parts of the West Bank, many in locations that further fragment Palestinian communities and undermine territorial contiguity. The concentration of settlement activity in East Jerusalem during 2024 reflects the strategic importance of this area for determining the future viability of a two-state solution.

### ADVANCED SETTLEMENTS IN AND AROUND OCCUPIED EAST JERUSALEM

East Jerusalem developments in 2024 continued the sustained expansion observed in 2022 and 2023, in particular in areas that are considered crucial for the viability of Jerusalem serving as the future capital for both states. A total of 40 planning schemes for approximately 18,988 housing units were advanced in East Jerusalem during 2024. The most strategically significant development was the advancement of the Givat Hamatos expansion plan (known as the Hebron Road Strip) toward final approval in December 2024. This plan calls for 3,500 housing units and would more than double the number of housing units in the Givat Hamatos settlement, enlarging its area by nearly 40%, representing a critical threat to any future two-state arrangement. Givat Hamatos is currently under construction and is the first new settlement built beyond the Green Line in Jerusalem in over two decades. The advancement of the Hebron Road Strip expansion, alongside plans for Givat Shaked and Har Homa expansion, would complete a southern ring of Israeli settlements that permanently blocks any contiguity between East Jerusalem and the southern West Bank<sup>5</sup>. Among the 40 plans advanced, 12 were for either new settlements or settlement expansions with a total of 9,186 housing units. The remaining 28 plans were for urban renewal within existing settlements, totalling 9,802 housing units. Several of these developments, including in Sheikh Jarrah, are slated for construction inside existing Palestinian neighborhoods a pattern that has historically increased friction between communities and is accompanied by heightened Israeli security measures through private security companies. These developments often coincide with a “settlement of land title” process led by the General Custodian (the Israeli state body that manages assets allegedly belonging to Jews prior to 1948). This process operates with limited transparency and appears to function as a systematic method for land appropriation and Palestinian displacement in East Jerusalem<sup>6</sup>. The planning environment reveals stark disparities. Only 13 percent of East Jerusalem is zoned for Palestinian construction much of it already built up while 35 percent has been allocated for Israeli settlements. This restrictive planning regime makes building permits virtually impossible for Palestinians to obtain<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, 2024 saw a record number of Palestinian home demolitions in East Jerusalem, with 214 structures demolished due to alleged lack of building permits. The Jerusalem Municipality systematically demolished homes in Silwan’s Al-Bustan neighborhood as part

of plans to create the “King’s Garden” tourist park, with over 15 homes demolished in Al-Bustan alone.<sup>3</sup>

The EU has repeatedly called on Israel not to proceed with plans under its settlement policy and to halt all settlement activities. It remains the EU’s firm position that settlements are illegal under international law. Israel’s decision to advance plans for the approval and construction of new settlement units in 2024 further undermines the prospects of a viable two-state solution. In July 2024, the International Court of Justice ruled that Israel’s continued presence in the occupied Palestinian territories is unlawful, leads to the displacement of Palestinians and should be brought to an end as rapidly as possible.<sup>4</sup>

### **Refugees and Human Rights**

The PA cooperated with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in providing protection and assistance to Palestinian refugees in the West Bank. Hamas’ attack on Israel on October 7, 2023 forcibly displaced tens of thousands of Israelis from their homes and communities in the south near Gaza. On October 8, 2023 – Hezbollah joined Hamas in the attack upon Israel – which forcibly displaced tens of thousands of Israelis from their homes and communities in the north near Lebanon and Syria. Tens of thousands of individuals in Gaza have voluntarily left as a direct result of Hamas’ attack on Israel, which helped to provide safe passage out for those who chose to leave. Egypt kept its borders closed except for smuggling routes that risks the safety and health of those seeking to leave through the Sinai. Much of the international community opposed efforts to permit Palestinians to voluntarily leave Gaza if they chose, entrapping Palestinians in Gaza.<sup>5</sup> The violence and loss of human lives in the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel remain of deep concern for the EU. The Palestinian population continues to face repeated human rights violations and abuses. The EU recalls the importance of unhindered work of civil society organisations, both in Israel and in the occupied Palestinian territory.

The worsening humanitarian and human rights situation in the Gaza Strip remains of grave concern and the EU calls for an end to the closure, full opening of the crossing points, while addressing Israel’s security concerns, and unimpeded access for humanitarian actors.

The EU firmly condemns rockets, incendiary balloons and other attacks from the Gaza strip targeting civilians in Israel, as well as terrorist attacks, and any other form of violence, including a continued upward trend of settler related incidents, and incitement on all sides. While recalling Israel’s right to defend its legitimate security interests, the EU expects the Israeli authorities to fully meet their obligations under International Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law, not least in these difficult times of the coronavirus pandemic, and including with regards to Palestinian detainees in Israeli prisons.<sup>6</sup>

### **Security Dynamic**

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<sup>3</sup> 2024 Report on Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, EUROPEAN UNION (Office of the European Union Representative (West Bank and Gaza Strip, UNRWA), Reporting period -January - December 2024,

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2024, United States Department of State • Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.pp14

<sup>6</sup> EU Statement – United Nations Security Council: Situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian Question, 6 January 2021, New York.

The Israel-Palestine conflict is one of the most violent and bloodiest protracted conflict in the post World War II era, which has resulted in massive human casualties and human rights abuses for decades. The numerous wars in conjunction with the rise of militant groups like Hezbollah and Hamas have led to the development of a human security dilemma in Palestine and Israel. Decades of violence and destruction have resulted in massive human casualties, political chaos and disruption to the way of life of the people in the region.