



Academic Paper

The Crisis in EU's Stance Regarding Operation Al-Aqsa Flood



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The Crisis in EU's Stance Regarding Operation Al-Aqsa Flood

Prof. Dr. Walid 'Abd al-Hay¹

Introduction

With 27 member states, a total population of approximately 449 million, and a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of about \$19.35 trillion (nominal) and \$26.64 trillion (Purchasing Power Parity), the European Union (EU) stands as a formidable force, both economically and demographically. Additionally, it holds the distinction of being the largest contributor to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Such prominence renders the EU a crucial player in international affairs, particularly concerning the Middle East, given its geographical proximity—linked by the Mediterranean Sea—and extensive historical ties spanning ancient, modern and contemporary epochs. Notably, several million Arabs, numbering between 4-5 million, are employed in EU countries or hold citizenship within them. Additionally, trade between the EU and Arab nations constitutes 30% of total Arab trade.² This underscores the EU's significant role in shaping Middle Eastern conflicts, with Operation al-Aqsa flood being the most recent iteration.



Nonetheless, an examination of the level of consensus in foreign policy among EU member states, particularly regarding Middle Eastern matters and specifically the Palestine issue, unveils a deeply intricate crisis. This crisis not only constrains the EU's ability to exert influence but also underscores the complexity of the issue at hand. In this study, we aim to explore this complexity by identifying indicators of divergence in European positions, focusing on several key aspects, namely:

First: Divergence in Official European Positions: Federal and National³

The European stance is discernible through collective EU declarations or statements issued by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, on one front, and by monitoring the official statements issued by individual EU member states on the other. Understanding the pertinent EU institutions governing decision-making is crucial: the EU Parliament represents member states' societies, the EU Council represents member states' governments, and the EU



Josep Borrell



Commission advocates for the Union’s overall interest. According to decision-making procedures, these institutions are expected to align harmoniously. The EU Commission compiles a report concerning the topic under discussion, known as “Impact Assessment.” This assessment delves into the various interests and consequences associated with the subject matter, drawing upon data sourced from governments and various civil society organizations across member states. Additionally, the EU Parliament reserves the right to abstain from deliberating on the topic if it deems local-level discussion more appropriate (i.e., within individual countries). Upon submission of the Commission’s report, both the Parliament and the Council present their proposals or request amendments to the draft or report provided by the Commission. Should the Commission’s stance clash with the demands for amendment, the decision falls to the Council to either accept or reject it, contingent upon achieving unanimous decision. In instances where unanimity is not attained, the Commission retains the option to withdraw its report. Consequently, European decisions hinge upon approval from both the Parliament and the Council.

This implies that European decisions must reconcile the interests of member states, requiring agreement between the EU Council and Parliament on the EU Commission’s proposals. This process is not straightforward, particularly considering that unanimous approval is necessary, adding further complexity to the matter.⁴

In light of these decision-making mechanisms, the EU stance regarding Operation al-Aqsa Flood can be outlined as follows:

- ✓ **1. Position on Operation al-Aqsa Flood:** The EU stance consistently involves “condemning the attack perpetrated by the Palestinian resistance and categorizing it as “terrorism and barbarism.” This position has remained unchanged since the inception of Operation al-Aqsa Flood. Notably, official EU statements and analyses typically lack acknowledgment or examination of the motives behind the Operation. There is no reference to the prolonged siege of the Gaza Strip (GS) since the Israeli withdrawal in 2005, nor to the series of Israeli attacks on Gaza, especially the major military operations in 2005-2007, 2008/2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021, which resulted in the deaths of approximately 4,756 Palestinians,⁵ not to mention the targeted assassinations of Palestinian leaders within GS.



This indicates that the EU stance on Operation al-Aqsa Flood is entirely divorced from its historical context, portraying it merely as “an attack for attack’s sake” without any underlying reasons. Indeed, the persistent portrayal of Operation al-Aqsa Flood as

an act of “terrorism” is evident in the majority of official collective and individual EU statements, as well as a considerable portion of European media coverage.⁶ If we disregard this aspect of the European stance, we can categorize the positions of EU countries into three:⁷

- ▶ • **Full Endorsement of Israel:** This stance is exemplified by actions such as hoisting Israeli flags atop government buildings or staunchly backing Israeli operations in GS. It involves justifying the extensive killing of Palestinian civilians and refraining from any critique of Israeli policies. Leading this position are the Czech Republic, Austria, Hungary, and to some extent, Germany.
- ▶ • **Nations with Moderate Views:** These countries criticize Operation al-Aqsa Flood, while advocating for peace and calling for a ceasefire. Their statements often include criticism of Israel’s breaches of international humanitarian law. Representing this group are Belgium, Spain and Ireland, with France aligning closely with them in recent times.
- ▶ • **Conservative-leaning States Supporting Israel with Caution:** This faction typifies the stances of the remaining EU countries. They extend support to Israel but with a measure of circumspection.
- ▶ • **Despite not being an EU member, the United Kingdom (UK) position closely aligns with that of the United States (US), albeit with some recent changes.**

It is evident that the general direction of the EU position leans closer to the Israeli stance. While there have been statements from certain official European figures strongly condemning Israel, accusing it of being an apartheid state and advocating for sanctions or boycotts, such as the statement made by Spanish Deputy Prime Minister Yolanda Díaz, these are considered personal statements and do not represent the position of the government as a whole.⁸ Furthermore, it's important to note that the position of an individual EU country does not necessarily represent the collective stance of the EU.



✓ **2. Position on the Israeli response:** The stances of the three previous categories evidently acknowledge “Israel’s right to self-defense,” while strongly condemning Operation al-Aqsa Flood. While the initial call emphasized securing the humanitarian needs of civilians in Gaza, it lacked clarity and explicit reference to Israel’s responsibility in this matter. Additionally, the repeated call for the release of Israeli hostages overlooked the plight of thousands of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons.⁹



✓ **3. Position on the humanitarian dimension during the conflicts:** Numerous visits by European officials and EU representatives to the region underscored a dual focus: humanitarian aid and the issue of Israeli hostages. European positions regarding the conflict's dimensions were discernible through various indicators, including:¹⁰

- ▶ • On 15/10/2023, the EU issued a statement, with Hungary abstaining from signing, condemning “in the strongest possible terms” the Hamas attack, affirming “Israel’s right to defend itself,” reiterating “the importance to ensure the protection of all civilians,” calling for the immediate “release of hostages without any preconditions,” reiterating “the importance of the provision of urgent humanitarian aid and... ensuring that such assistance is not abused by terrorist organisations,” and committing “to a lasting and sustainable peace based on the two-state solution,” while underlining “the need to engage broadly with the legitimate Palestinian authorities.” This position was reiterated in a statement by European leaders on 11/3/2024, with the addition of a paragraph urging Israel to “refrain from a ground operation in Rafah,” and calling for “restraint in the West Bank and East Jerusalem,” and “strongly” condemning “extremist settler violence.”¹¹ Additionally, on 3/4/2024, the Commission issued a statement regarding the killing of seven members of a humanitarian team of World Central Kitchen by the Israeli army, urging the Israeli authorities “to conduct a thorough investigation and ensure accountability for those who are responsible.”¹²



It is worth noting that European resolutions do not encompass any punitive measures directed towards Israel, despite the significant humanitarian crises in GS and occasionally in the West Bank (WB). European actions have been confined to modest initiatives, such as the EU Council imposing restrictive measures under the EU’s Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime on four settlers and two extremist settler organizations, who “are responsible for serious human rights abuses against Palestinians, including torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and for the violation of right to property and to private and family life of Palestinians in the West Bank.” Furthermore, in its statement in March 2024, the EU Council “for safe access to the Holy sites to be ensured” and condemned “the Israeli government’s decisions to further expand illegal settlements” in WB.¹³

- ▶ • Continued inconsistency in statements by EU leaders persists. In October 2023, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz affirmed that “Israel is a democratic state guided by very humanitarian principles and so we can be certain that the Israeli army will respect the rules that arise from international law in everything it does,” and added, “I have no doubt about that.” However, Scholz's remarks contrasted sharply with comments by “EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell and Charles Michel, the chairman of EU leaders’ summits, who have



said that a total blockade of Gaza and attacks on civilian infrastructure already contravene international law.”¹⁴ This stance contradicts the German chancellor's assertions.

The European Parliament, meant to voice the collective will of Europeans, struggled to reach a decision on the crisis, delaying a resolution for over three months following the outbreak of war. In January 2024, the EU Parliament finally adopted a resolution urging a “permanent ceasefire.” However, this resolution was contingent upon two conditions: the dismantling of Hamas and the unconditional return of Israeli captives.¹⁵ Essentially, this framework aligned with Israel's military objectives, aiming for their fulfillment without incurring losses. Subsequently, in February 2024, 26 EU countries called for an “immediate humanitarian pause.” Despite widespread support, Hungary's objection¹⁶ thwarted the resolution's passage, aligning with Israel’s preferences.

✓ 4. European Perspectives on the GS war and Arab-Israeli Settlement: Observing European stances reveals gradual and somewhat hesitant shifts during Operation al-Aqsa Flood and throughout the historical conflict. This is evident through the following indicators:

- ▶ • **UN Voting Patterns:** A comparison of General Assembly votes on peace settlement initiatives, including humanitarian ceasefires post-Operation al-Aqsa Flood, illustrates a nuanced European stance. Initially, on 27/10/2023, only 8 out of the 27 EU member states, notably France, supported the first resolution. The majority either opposed or abstained from voting. However, by 12/12/2023, the majority of EU countries endorsed a resolution advocating for a ceasefire, with exceptions such as Austria and the Czech Republic, known for their staunch support of Israel. The trends are summarized in the following table:

Table 1: European Voting Trends in the General Assembly Regarding Operation al-Aqsa Flood¹⁷

Resolution 27/10/2023	Country	Resolution 12/12/2023	Country
For: 8	France - Belgium - Ireland - Luxembourg - Malta - Portugal - Slovenia - Spain	17	Belgium - Greece - Croatia - Ireland - Cyprus - Latvia - Denmark - Luxembourg - Malta - Estonia - Finland - Poland – France - Portugal - Slovenia - Spain - Sweden
Against: 4	Austria-Croatia-Czech Republic-Hungary	2	Austria-Czech Republic
Abstained: 15	Bulgaria - Cyprus - Denmark - Estonia - Finland - Germany - Greece - Italy - Latvia - Lithuania - Netherlands - Poland - Slovakia - Sweden - Romania	8	Bulgaria - Germany - Hungary - Italy - Lithuania - Slovakia - Romania - Netherlands



- ▶ • In the UN Security Council, three resolutions were passed. The first was on 15/11/2023, endorsed by 12 members, calling for a “humanitarian pauses.” The second resolution was passed on 22/12/2023, endorsed by 13 countries, aiming to increase humanitarian aid and open crossings to GS. The third resolution, passed on 25/3/2024, called for an “immediate ceasefire” and the “immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.” Furthermore, the US blocked a draft resolution submitted by Algeria on 19/4/2024 to recognize Palestine as a full UN member state.
- ▶ • Looking at the European vote, we can see that:¹⁸
 1. In the first resolution, Switzerland, France, UK and Malta abstained.
 2. The second resolution was supported by France, UK, Malta and Switzerland.
 3. The third resolution was supported by UK, France, Slovenia and Malta.
 4. The draft resolution, which was aborted by the US veto, was supported by France, Malta and Slovenia on the one hand, while the European countries that are not members of the Union abstained from voting; UK and Switzerland.¹⁹

Comparison of voting behavior indicates an increasing alignment with the Palestinian position, notably within the General Assembly and the Security Council, with some observable shifts in the stances of France and UK in the Security Council towards a similar direction.

A historical analysis of EU and European voting behavior reveals persistent divergence, influenced by factors such as the expansion of EU membership (from 11 pre-Soviet Union collapse to 27 presently) and shifts in the international system dynamics. Quantitative studies reveal that the Arab-Israeli conflict holds the second-highest level of consensus among European countries in the UN General Assembly voting, following democracy, during the period spanning 1987 to 2005. The overall consensus rate stood at 73% during this time frame, although it experienced a subsequent decline.



Notably, the consensus rate fluctuates across different topics, with a notable decrease to 48% specifically within the realm of UN resolutions concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict.²⁰ Variability in consensus rates is evident across various topics, particularly among subsystems within the EU.²¹



Second: Diverse Stances Across EU Institutions

In the preceding discussion, we addressed the pivotal institutions within the EU decision-making framework (the Commission, Parliament and Council), alongside the issue of unanimous decision-making. It's notable that divergent positions manifest not only among EU institutions but also between member states. Moreover, the requirement of unanimity effectively grants each country veto power over any decision. This became glaringly apparent during the European Summit in mid-December 2023, where despite earnest endeavors by Belgium and Ireland, supported by Slovenia and Spain, no statement addressing the crisis was issued, and in which European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, affiliated with the Christian Democratic Union of Germany Party, displayed an “unshifting support to Israel.” On the strategic front regarding the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the EU reiterated its call for a two-state solution without delving into its specifics or implementation procedures.²²



Ursula von der Leyen

Third: European Ambivalence Towards UNRWA

Following Israel's allegations that 12 employees of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in GS were involved in Operation al-Aqsa Flood, 18 countries, including several European countries, opted in early January 2024 to suspend their contributions to the Agency's budget. This group included France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Finland, and UK. Conversely, Spain, Ireland, and Luxembourg remained steadfast in their commitment to supporting UNRWA financially. Nonetheless, by early March 2024, the EU sanctioned the allocation of €68 million to be disbursed to Palestinians through the Red Cross and other humanitarian entities, in addition to the initially earmarked €82 million for the year 2024. However, the EU imposed certain conditions on the allocation, particularly concerning the conduct of agency personnel, to ensure they refrain from involvement in any “terrorist” activities.²³



Although no international or European investigation was initiated regarding the Israeli accusation, influential nations such as Germany, France, Italy and the UK swiftly responded by halting their funding to UNRWA. Despite the organization employing nearly 30 thousand individuals, the alleged violation of the law by less than 0.04%



of its staff, if true, does not warrant penalizing an institution of such international magnitude, as articulated by a Japanese author.²⁴ Numerous UN human rights experts expressed grave concern at the harmful decision to suspend funding to the agency, contending that holding UNRWA as a whole accountable for the misconduct of a few employees, if allegations are proven, is unjustifiable and carries grave repercussions for human rights, a stance upheld by the International Court of Justice (ICJ).²⁵ The absence of evidence supporting the Israeli claim prompted several countries to reassess their decision to suspend aid.



However, the stance of certain European countries, particularly the major ones, highlights the swiftness with which Europeans resort to punitive measures when Israel makes an allegation, even if it remains unverified. Conversely, there's a norm of delay regarding Palestinian allegations, even when substantiated:²⁶

- ✓ 1. European alignment with US policy within the multipolar competition with China and Russia is apparent. This is reflected in the marginalization of the European role in the Middle East Quartet, with US dominance over the committee's proceedings. Additionally, Europe's absence from negotiations to resolve the current Gaza conflict underscores this alignment, leaving the task to the US.



- ✓ 2. Intra-EU or internal contestation exist between Union institutions and the divergent interests of individual European countries.
- ✓ 3. Regional fragmentation is evident through both the divergence of Arab positions and the discord between some Arab states and Iran, a key player in the Middle Eastern regional system. This fragmentation diminishes the effectiveness of the European role.

Fourth: The European Stance on the Iranian Assault Against Israel

The EU response, alongside UK, to the Iranian strike on Israeli military sites on 13/4/2024 was marked by three key facets:²⁷



- ✓ 1. Active military involvement, notably from France and the UK, in countering Iranian missile launches and incursions to safeguard Israel, particularly within Jordanian airspace.
- ✓ 2. Adoption of expanded sanctions against Iran, particularly concerning military technology.
- ✓ 3. Emphasizing the prevention of escalating confrontations at the regional level.



Analyzing the three European stances, we observe the following:

- ✓ 1. The swiftness of the European response to the Iranian stance contrasts with the EU’s lack of action regarding any Israeli actions. Specifically, the EU resorts to “diplomatic reproaches” toward Israel while promptly reacting procedurally toward any party it deems hostile to Israel. European powers swiftly responded to the Iranian attack, engaging in discussions regarding the imposition of sanctions on Iran. However, the same EU opted to merely “condemn” the Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus, refraining from any substantive action. This stance is notable given that the Israeli attack contravened international law both diplomatically, by targeting a diplomatic mission, and politically, by encroaching upon the sovereignty of Syria, an independent state and UN member. Furthermore, the assault on the Iranian mission led to casualties among civilians and military personnel.
- ✓ 2. In the EU, there are differences in views, particularly regarding foreign policy. While the Netherlands, the Czech Republic and Sweden advocate for labeling the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization, France and Germany are hesitant, citing the need for evidence of the IRGC’s impact on EU countries’ internal security, which they claim is lacking.



Fifth: Shifting Trends in European Public Opinion

European attitudes ranged from hesitant backing of the Palestinian stance to widespread support. However, some major European countries, like Germany, banned pro-Palestine protests. Furthermore, “restrictions on freedom of expression have also been imposed, targeting symbols associated with Palestine,” such as the “Palestinian flag and wearing the Keffiyeh.” This occurred in 12 EU member states, and in addition, cases



of excessive force were documented in at least seven member states.²⁸ Subsequent reports reveal that certain countries, including France and Switzerland, encountered challenges with local judicial authorities when attempting to “impose a blanket ban on all demonstrations in support of Palestinians.”²⁹ In Europe, the distribution map of pro-Palestinian demonstrations notably outweighs support for Israel.³⁰ Perhaps this indicates the widespread support across Europe for the Palestinian stance. Our analysis of European opinion polls regarding Operation al-Aqsa Flood reveals a certain discord between EU officials and the general public regarding their stance on the operation. Highlighting the disparity between Ursula von der Leyen’s unequivocal support for Israel and the more critical stance taken by EU Council President Charles Michel, a Belgian liberal, and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, on one hand, and the comparison between the official and popular European position towards the crisis, on the other hand, emphasize this contrast. For instance, while the official stance in the Netherlands leans heavily towards Israel, 55% of the public thought that the Dutch government should be more critical of Israel, and only 6% said it should be more supportive of it. Similarly, in Germany, which historically aligns more with the Israeli position, 61% of Germans said Israel’s military action in Gaza was not justified given the many civilian victims, while 25% thought it was.³¹



European opinion polls, including those in the UK, suggest that the ongoing Israeli military campaign has led to a 9% decline in sympathy for Israel among the European public from October to December 2023. The division in European popular sentiment towards Palestine or Israel is evident, with approximately 24–31% expressing sympathy for both sides, averaging around 28%. Additionally, 27–37% of Europeans remain “unsure” about their sympathies. This uncertainty translates to 32% of Europeans being undecided about which side aligns with their position, while roughly 30% refrain from taking sides altogether.³²

As for Operation al-Aqsa Flood in particular and the Israeli reaction to it, the European polls revealed the following:³³

Table 2: Trends in European Public Opinion Towards the Justification of the GS War (Survey conducted in mid-November 2023)

 Hamas attack on 7 Oct	UK	France	Germany*	Italy	Spain	Denmark	Sweden
Not justified	75	64	75	70	80	76	70
Justified	4	11	8	7	7	6	8
Don't know	21	26	17	23	13	19	22
Israel's attack on GS	UK	France	Germany*	Italy	Spain	Denmark	Sweden
Not justified	44	37	44	56	59	42	41
Justified	29	34	35	18	25	34	32
Don't know	27	29	21	26	16	25	28

*** Except in Germany, where fieldwork took place in early December 2023.**

- ✓ 1. It's worth noting that the Spanish exhibited the highest level of criticism towards Operation al-Aqsa Flood, despite the fact that their government is the closest to the Palestinian position. Conversely, the French populace was the least critical of the operation, despite the official Spanish position being markedly more aligned with the Palestinians than the official French stance.
- ✓ 2. Similarly, the Spanish society displayed the highest rate of rejection towards the Israeli response to Operation al-Aqsa Flood, while the French people were the least critical of the Israeli attack.
- ✓ 3. Among Europeans, the rejection of Operation al-Aqsa Flood stands at 72.9%, whereas the criticism rate of the Israeli attack is 46%.

Regarding Israel's appeal for a ceasefire, the outcomes are delineated in the subsequent table:



Table 3: Public Opinion Regarding the Cessation or Continuation of Israel’s military endeavor

	Italy	Spain	UK	France	Germany	Denmark	Sweden
Stop and call a ceasefire	73	70	59	59	57	57	55
Continue to take military action	8	16	19	22	23	22	42
Don’t know	19	14	22	19	20	21	21

Notably, Sweden demonstrates the highest level of support for Israel to persist in its military operations, at 42%, whereas Italy exhibits the lowest level. Conversely, public sentiment in both Italy and Spain leans noticeably towards the need for Israel to cease fire, while the rest of the European countries ranged between 55% and 59% in favor of a ceasefire.

As for the two-state solution, the results were as follows:

Table 4: European Public Opinion on the Two-State Solution

	Germany	Spain	Italy	Denmark	UK	Sweden	France
Support	70	70	69	67	66	63	60
Oppose	11	13	11	11	7	13	14
Not sure	18	18	21	22	27	25	26

The French exhibit the lowest level of support for a two-state solution at 60%, contrasted by 70% among the populations of Germany and Spain. This signifies that over two-thirds of European societies endorse a two-state solution.

These quantitative indicators highlight the political disparity between certain official government stances and their respective public, contributing to a more perplexing European landscape and impeding decision-making processes.

European Contestation

In preceding sections, we highlighted the contrasting camps or wings within Europe’s official stances. There exists disparity among governments regarding Operation al-Aqsa



Flood, variation in UN voting from one phase to the next, discrepancies in European public sentiment, and variance in the alignment of public sentiment within each nation with the directives of their respective governments. This phenomenon is not limited solely to EU countries, but also encompasses UK's role as a player in European politics.³⁴



Remarkably, the disparity between the stances of European countries is not insignificant. For instance, in the first week of April 2024, Ireland “announced it would intervene in South Africa’s landmark international court of justice case against Israel by attempting to widen the definition of genocide to include blocking aid,” a stance diverging from that of the Czech Republic or Hungary.³⁵

Conclusion

- ✓ 1. There is widespread European acceptance of the ceasefire, aligning with UN, General Assembly and Security Council resolutions.
- ✓ 2. Criticism and rejection of the Israeli position within the European community are gaining momentum. There is widespread European acceptance of the ceasefire, aligning with UN, General Assembly, and Security Council resolutions.
- ✓ 3. There has been a swift reversal from halting aid to the UNRWA for Palestinian refugees.
- ✓ 4. Difficulty in achieving unified decisions within the EU regarding Palestine.
- ✓ 5. European diplomacy demonstrates swift action against the Arab side in case of disagreement on specific issues, yet European responses to Israeli violations, even clear ones, are marked by delay, procrastination and excuses. This is evidenced by the prevalence of European abstentions in such situations.
- ✓ 6. Multipolar competition in the region, intra-EU contestation and regional fragmentation make the weight of the European decision less centralized in the Arab-Israeli conflict, despite Europe’s significant population, economic, military and scientific power.



Endnotes

- ¹ An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 120 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.
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