

THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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Abstract: *Which will dominate the Middle East: extremism or the path of compromise? Is it possible that the European Union together with the international community to contribute to the establishment of a lasting, just and comprehensive peace? This paper presents some answers to these questions which will certainly be helpful in foreshadowing the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the situation in the entire Middle East. The paper concentrates on and analyzes the role of the European Union regarding the mediation/resolving of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.*

Key words: *Israeli-Palestinian conflict, mediation, Middle East, European Union.*

1. Introduction

It is for real that peace is wanted in the Middle East and Near East? And if so, who can make a decisive contribution in this regard? In the following, we will try to answer this question by analyzing the potential role that the European Union diplomacy can play in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian crisis.

Looking back, the evolution of the involvement of European states in the Middle East conflict can be seen as having consistently supported the same perspective on peace, despite the involvement of many actors (regional or extra-regional), who over time advanced various versions regarding the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis.

Also, the history shows us that some countries in southern Europe (especially France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal) have frequently expressed their concern about the impact that the political-economic instability in the Middle East may have had on the European Community, but also on the North African region, predicting possible emigration from the Mediterranean (Steinberg, 1999).

If we look at the level of foreign policy it can be seen that the EU has opted for a gradual concentration of its strategy efforts, being primarily engaged in intensifying economic cooperation with the countries of the North African region, in the Near and Middle East being engaged in accelerating/completing the peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

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The basic position of the European Union regarding the peace process is the Declaration of Venice, adopted by the Council of Europe on June 13th, 1980 and it establishes the right to existence and security of all states in the region, including Israel, and justice for all peoples, which implies the recognition of the legitimate rights of Palestinian people.

By the Rome Declaration, from 25th March 2017, talking about the future of Europe, European leaders promised a "stronger Europe on the global scene: a Union further developing existing partnerships, building new ones and promoting stability and prosperity in its immediate neighborhood to the east and south, but also in the Middle East and across Africa and globally" (Rome Declaration, 2017, p. 2).

Based on these considerations, although the Union is an intergovernmental body made up of 28 states that belong to different cultures, with different histories and particular interests (reflected over time in foreign policies), the EU has gradually become interested in and aware of the importance of developing a diplomacy that will ensure a climate of peace and stability in the Middle East given the geographical proximity, geopolitical considerations and multiple threats (such as: terrorism, organized crime, migration and so on) to the European security.

The European Union as an important actor, both political and economic, was close to the Near and Middle East and developed partnership agreements on cooperation with several countries belonging to these areas. The Near and Middle East, North Africa and the Persian Gulf had always been the EU strategic areas with potential and often were found on the foreign policy agenda of the Union.

In this respect, the EU has initiated programs of political and economic cooperation, aimed, on the one hand, to represent the interests of the Union in regions with important geo-economic high level (if we consider the hydrocarbon resources in the Gulf region), and, on the other hand, to contribute to increasing the degree of political and economic stability of the states included in the Middle East macro-region.

Although in the last decade, the EU has made considerable progress in becoming a real political union, with a unitary security/defense policy, analysts appreciate that the Union does not enjoy too much visibility at international level, being still far from representing a force from a political point of view. However, what gives it international visibility is the status acquired, in last decade, as the main payer/donor of humanitarian aid in the world, also activating in humanitarian and rescue missions, peacekeeping missions and crisis management (Pîslaru, 2008).

According to the official position of the European Union, the Resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict is a fundamental interest of the EU. The EU's objective is a two-state solution with an independent, democratic, viable and contiguous Palestinian state living side-by-side in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbors (European External Action Service, 2019).

The EU appreciate that the only way to resolve the conflict is through an agreement that ends the occupation which began in 1967, that ends all claims and that fulfills the aspirations of both parties. A one-state reality would not be compatible with these aspirations. The EU consider that a lasting solution must be achieved on the basis of the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions, the Madrid principles including land for peace,

the Roadmap, agreements previously reached by the parties and by the Arab Peace Initiative (European External Action Service, 2019).

According to the European Union's external action plan, the EU is willing to work with its partners to re-launch the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, based on four important pillars. One pillar is about the agreement on the borders of the two states, based on the June, 4th 1967 lines with equivalent land swaps as may be agreed between the parties; in this regard, the EU will recognize changes to the pre-1967 borders, including with regard to Jerusalem, only when agreed by the parties (European External Action Service, 2019).

The second pillar is about security arrangements, on the one hand for Palestinians, with respecting their sovereignty and proof that the occupation is over; and, on the other hand, for Israelis, ensuring security arrangements for protecting their security, preventing the resurgence of terrorism and deal effectively with security threats. The third pillar refers to the just, fair, agreed and realistic solution to the refugee question. The last pillar is related to the fulfillment of the aspirations of both parties for Jerusalem. The EU is convinced that a way through negotiations must be found in order to resolve the status of Jerusalem as the future capital of both states.

To that end, in the last decade the EU has undertaken a range of political and practical activities that prove that it is the largest donor to Palestinian state-building efforts aiming at a Palestinian state based on the rule of law and respect for human rights and has consistently called for intra-Palestinian reconciliation and holding democratic elections.

Related to the chances of ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the EU sustain that the only viable solution is a two-state solution with an independent, democratic, contiguous and viable Palestinian state living side-by-side with Israel and its other neighbors. The EU's long-term policy asserts that negotiations remain the best way forward (European External Action Service, 2019).

2. Methodology of Research and Results

Being interested in identifying the level of perception concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the potential role of the European Union, as well as finding a concrete modality for ending this conflict, analyzed by a sociological investigation of some points of view offered by experts in the Middle East, professionals in International Relations, diplomats accredited in this region, academics and politicians.

The research is based on a content analysis of the answers given by 25 specialists in the field; in the collection of the answers, I have used the Delphi method, whose specificity is to apply successive questionnaires to respondents. Regarding the sociological approach, and in collecting responses, I have used the Delphi method and the respondents had to give specialized answers about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as assessments regarding the role of the European Union's diplomacy in managing and resolving the conflict.

Considering the hypothesis from which I started my research, the respondents answered a question about: if one could talk about a real and effective diplomacy at the

European Union level and if it were active and working in the Middle East in order to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and if the EU could make a decisive contribution considering the general effort of the international communities in this direction (Bolborici, 2018, p. 51).

The questionnaire applied to the respondents included the following three questions but just two of those were directly linked with this present research. These are:

1. Do you consider that the EU has the necessary and sufficient skills regarding the mediation/resolving the Israeli-Palestinian crisis?
2. Taking as reference the current situation in the Middle East, what do you consider that the chance of concluding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a positive way depends on both parties)?
3. active coordinated involvement of the major international actors [eg. the Quartet for the Middle East (US, EU, Russia and UN)]?
4. cooperation/ involvement of third countries interested in peace and stability in the region?
5. developing a culture of responsibility (accountability) at regional level involving both the Israelis, the Palestinians and the neighboring Arab states (as well the Arab League) to pacify the region?
6. compliance and implementation of agreements already reached between the two sides?

At the 3rd question 7 respondents out of 25 answered yes, they appreciated that the EU has the necessary and sufficient skills in mediation / resolving the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, while 9 respondents responded negatively.

At the second question the respondents answered the first question, thus; 23% preferred variant a) the active and coordinated involvement of the major international actors; 17%) choose variant b) cooperation/involvement of third countries interested; 23% emphasized variant c) developing a culture of responsibility (accountability) at regional level; 17% consider valid variant d), compliance and implementation of the agreements already reached; 20% have chosen variant e), other factors/conditions.

To both questions respondents answered either punctually or have given other alternative possible answers while providing additional explanations and evidence as it can be seen in the following lines.

One of the respondents considers that the EU has competencies, but does not have the necessary influence; another in a categorically manner, believes that the EU could not be efficient on their own and, therefore, considers that it should join in a common effort near the USA and other nations, although the leading role in resolving the conflict belongs to the Israelis and the Palestinians. The next answer is in the same vein. The respondent thinks that Europeans have the impression that any conflict can be resolved as the way it was the German problem, through trade and other commitments, tending to solve a problem skipping steps (Bolborici, 2016, pp. 256-257).

In a reluctant manner one respondent offered a rigorous response, stressing nevertheless that it is possible that the EU may have those necessary abilities (and if they exist, in his opinion they are hidden), which can be developed over time, although the reality of last few decades has shown that every European initiative in this area

failed. The same respondent in supporting this assertion made some comments about the fact that the Barcelona process was an enormous loss of money, did not contribute to stability in the region in any way, and, on the other hand, by infusing European funds to some radical NGOs through the Partnership for Peace under the pretext of ensuring peace and human rights, a political attack against Israel was being organized in reality.

Another respondent considers that the EU has skills but they are limited; someone else considers that the EU can play an important role as a third-party but it is not a sufficient condition if conflict is at stake.

Rather semi-optimistic, another answer noted that the EU has competence, the means and the know-how needed, but does not have the tools and the necessary power in mediating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, unlike the United States, (who are the most influential actors in the conflict), the EU has no power to put pressure on Israel.

Someone gave a negative response by arguments emphasizing that the EU is not a real political power, by missing an efficient common foreign policy, and with regard to the role that it plays in the Middle East, it is limited mainly to trade and humanitarian action.

One of the respondents is an Ambassador from the EU space. In his answer, he states that the EU can be a credible and effective mediator if there is political will to do this; he notices that until now political initiatives have been modest, even though financial support has been extremely consistent and generous.

Another respondent argues his negative answer stressing that the EU is unhelpful in the peace process from the Middle East; others sought to clarify that besides the fact that the EU is not competent, it has no influence on Israel;

In a more optimistic vein, another respondent expressed the belief that the EU certainly has the potential to play an important role in solving this conflict, in spite the fact that the United States have been orchestrating the peace process for decades.

A more detailed answer underlined the importance of the American presence at the negotiations table for peace, the respondent opines that in the best case the EU could keep alive the peace talks but without having the ability to initiate specifically any agreement with the Israelis (because, he considers, they just simply would not listen); however, he considers that the EU could provide support when it comes to the settlements, refugees, security and financial compensations.

A respondent (who wanted to remain anonymous) is convinced that the EU is unable to settle the first stage of the conflict and the EU should become involved in the second phase, to support humanly and financial the new administrative structure in building / strengthening institutional (the EU's role being similar to that played in the Kosovo crisis or the Eastern Balkans and West), in facilitating the transition towards democracy, by compliance with Human Rights/ minorities etc. (the complete responses and the entire research can be found at my book Bolborici, 2016).

One of the respondents, a professor, considers that the EU is not able to mediate/resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and explains this by the fact that Europe is still too influenced by a generation of politicians who should think in realistic terms.

Another respondent, an ambassador from the Middle East consider that, over time, the Union member states have developed good relations both with the Israel and Palestine (the EU is the first partner of Israel in the economic field and also the first

donor who support institutional development of the future state of Palestine), knowing that these relationships contribute to establishing a climate of peace in the region; on the other hand, he underlines that the EU's role is not so important in the region and for this reason it cannot influence the conflict resolution because it does not want to follow the political line drawn by the United States and the EU Member States do not share the same point of unified view regarding the Middle East peace process he concludes that the role of Europeans is currently of payer, not player.

In the same way, another respondent considers that there is nothing wrong with the EU competences in mediation and conflict resolution, but what is missing is the determination and power; the Union proving many times that is not able to act as a unitary actor.

The last answer in an optimistic note expresses that over the years the EU has proved more expertise in actions of peace-building than in actions of peace-making, but regarding the ability of mediation and foreign policy in general, the EU is still emerging but with chances to be developed over time.

3. Conclusions

Responding to the question of whether the European Union can play an important role in the evolution of the Middle East peace process, the most virulent critics believe that too strong national interests of some Member States have revealed an incoherent political Union, crushed by frequent internal blockages of unitary political action. In this regard, Brexit can be considered, as Sorea points out, a recent and dramatic expression of the diversity that the EU has assumed, but does not manage too well. However, in addition to the cold diplomatic language of the press releases, it does not legitimize it in this intractable conflict (Sorea, 2017, pp. 109-114).

Despite the strong historical, political, economic, cultural and religious states in the Middle East and efforts by Europe in the past three decades, its role in the region is currently marginalized, being focused mainly on economic issues; that is why there is a perception that "although the EU is an economic power, it does not have the ability to project the military power of Member States, being unable to translate its economic power into a real political influence in the Middle East (Hamntan, 2004, p. 12).

A discrepancy between the economic potential of the European Union and its foreign policy, can be noticed especially in the Middle East, while admitting that "the EU voice isn't heard as far as it should and its interests are taken only partially into account" (Hamntan, 2004, p. 12).

Some commentators believe that the lack of effective political engagement in the peace process denotes a deficit of the European Union in terms of its external relations (according to Hamntan external relations means political and economic relations with the world) in the Middle East, a deficit that results in the discrepancy/disagreement between the size of this organization's importance and potential and its potential effectively, respectively its inability to influence other international actors, especially in the Middle East (Hamntan, 2004, p. 42).

Another deficit registered at the European institutional level is "the lack of the EU's willingness to use economic levers, such as coercion, sanctions, and threats, in the situation of the countries of the Gulf, Iran or even Israel" (Hamntan, 2004, p. 42).

We can conclude that despite the constant involvement in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, the USA at this moment has reduced its chances of being a unique mediator. Another potential mediator is the European Union and although its involvement was more episodic, due partially to the general international context, it currently wants to have a significant role in reviving the peace talks, which have now reached an impasse.

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Referring to the situation in the Middle East, the chance of concluding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict depends largely on understanding the need of promoting and developing a culture of responsibility at regional level which means commitment in joint actions, between all sides: the Israelis, the Palestinians and their Arab neighboring states that could lead to a much needed regional political balance.

Strengthen of a culture, which to directs both parties of this conflict secular towards more responsibility, starting from the elites and finishing with the most deprived social categories, certainly would lead to an increased awareness of the importance of mutual assistance, which in turn, in the medium-term, would foster reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians and thus, in the alternative, between the Israelis and the Arab world.

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