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EU's 'Geopolitical Awakening' and Its Actorness in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict – *Quo Vadis?*

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This paper analyzes the European Union's "actorness" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly in the context of its "geopolitical awakening" and changing foreign policy approach. At a time when the EU is increasingly considered to be emerging as a "geopolitical actor", moving away from its normative power Europe stance, the paper questions whether there can be a more active role for the EU in the enduring conflicts in its neighborhood, such as the Palestinian issue. Despite a shift from a normative to a more geopolitical strategy, the EU's role has remained limited in the Palestinian issue, primarily focusing on providing humanitarian aid, financial support, and institution-building, while issuing declarations that often lack tangible impact. Within the context of external factors such as the developments regarding the Palestinian issue and internal challenges like migration further constraining the EU's capacity, the paper analyzes the weaknesses of the EU's actorness through the criteria of effectiveness and coherence. It argues that the EU's lack of effectiveness and cohesion not only undermines its ability to act as a foreign policy actor in the Israeli-Palestinian context, but also points to a broader problem of whether the current prospect of EU enlargement is credible concerning the 'EU's actorness' debate.

Introduction

During its meeting on 27 June 2024, the European Council underlined "its strongest condemnation of the brutal terrorist attacks conducted by Hamas and other terrorist groups against Israel on 7 October 2023", while calling on Israel to "comply with its obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law, in all circumstances." (European Council 2024) Reminding Israel of the importance of implementing the decisions of the ICJ, which are legally binding, and supporting UNSC Resolution 2735, the Council called for an immediate ceasefire, the release of all hostages, and the facilitation of humanitarian aid to Gaza. The EU has, for decades, been supporting a sustainable and lasting peace on the Palestinian issue based on a two- state solution - one with the State of Israel and "an independent, democratic, contiguous, sovereign, and viable State of Palestine living side by side in peace, security, and mutual recognition". Calling for a halt to the conflict in Gaza, the EU once again committed itself to a peaceful solution, the rebuilding of Gaza, and assisting in the reform of the Palestinian Authority.

These statements are a continuation of the EU's long practice of declarations, calls, and statements on the Palestinian issue, remaining short of demonstrating "actorness". The EU's role has mostly remained limited to providing humanitarian aid, financial support, and institution-building, as well as issuing declarations that hardly translate into political roles. Thus, like most other long-term conflicts in its neighborhood, the EU's actorness has remained limited. At a time when the EU is increasingly considered to be emerging as a "geopolitical actor", moving away from its normative power Europe stance, can there be a more active role for the EU in the enduring conflicts in its neighborhood, such as the Palestinian issue? Can the EU's actorness increase amidst a changing foreign policy approach? This report highlights the

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weaknesses of the EU's actorness in its neighborhood through the case of the Palestinian issue. The lack of effectiveness and coherence in the EU demonstrates this weakness.

This paper, by arguing that current mainstream theoretical approaches to European foreign policy, such as "normative power Europe", are overly optimistic and taking the arguments relating to the EU's "geopoliticization" (Cadier 2019) and "geopolitical awakening" (EEAS 2022) at its center, analyzes the EU's actorness in the Palestinian issue through two criteria: cohesion and effectiveness.

The EU's Geopolitical Turn

Since the mid-2010s, the EU's foreign policy has transitioned from a normative, values-driven orientation to a more geopolitical, interest-based strategy emphasizing security and realpolitik. This shift was clearly articulated in the 2016 EU Global Strategy, which identified violent conflict as a central threat and called for a multi-dimensional, multi-phased, multi-level, and multilateral approach to conflict resolution.

This transformation unfolded amid a series of profound internal and external crises, including the migration crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, and Brexit. These events compounded the EU's existing challenges, fostering a sense of fragmentation and raising questions about the Union's unity, legitimacy, and integration. The migration crisis, in particular, exposed the limits of intra-EU solidarity, revealing deep-seated economic and socio-political divisions among member states.

Concurrently, the EU's Southern Neighborhood and the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have undergone considerable geopolitical shifts, including the increasing influence of the Gulf states, the emergence of new alliances, and the persistence of intra-regional conflicts involving both state and non-state actors. In response, the EU has increasingly embraced a more traditional geopolitical posture, acknowledging the limitations of its former identity as a purely civilian and normative power.

As the then High Representative Josep Borrell emphasized, the EU must learn to "speak the language of power" to remain relevant globally (Borrell 2024). A watershed moment in this regard was 24 February 2022, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine catalyzed the EU's evolution into a more assertive security actor. This moment marked a discursive and strategic shift—from the notion of "Normative Power Europe" to a more assertive "Geopolitical Europe." As the European External Action Service (EEAS) stated in 2022, the war underscored that "Europe is even more in danger than we thought just a few months ago," prompting what has been widely described as the EU's "geopolitical awakening."

In an increasingly multipolar world, where power competition intensifies, the EU's ability to project influence—and thus exercise actorness—hinges more than ever on its internal coherence and capacity to act decisively in crises such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Conceptualizing the EU's Actorness

The European Union's (EU) actorness has been extensively explored in academic literature. Jupille and Caporaso (1998) identify four key criteria for assessing the EU's role in foreign policy: recognition (acknowledgment by third parties), authority (capacity to act externally), autonomy (independence from member states in policy-making), and cohesion (ability to unify member state preferences). They also introduce the notion of opportunity, referring to the structural context that enables or constrains EU action. Building on this work, Bretherton and Vogler (2006) expanded the framework by emphasizing three dimensions: opportunity, presence (the EU's global influence), and capacity (the internal ability to engage externally).

Following the Lisbon Treaty (2009), scholarly interest in EU actorness has grown significantly, leading to two dominant analytical strands. The first focuses on EU foreign policy's normative and rule-based nature, especially regarding norm diffusion across neighboring regions (e.g., Börzel and Risse 2012; Lavenex and

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Schimmelfennig 2011). In this context, EU enlargement has been seen as a critical tool of actorness, with mechanisms like conditionality, social learning, and strategic adaptation playing pivotal roles (e.g., Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004; Checkel 2005; Webb 2018). A more critical lens has emerged later, highlighting the localized nature of norm diffusion—its contestation, reinterpretation, and adaptation in recipient contexts (e.g., Acharya 2004 and 2009; Wiener 2004, 2007, 2014), thus adding nuance to the concept of actorness.

The second major body of literature assesses the EU as an active foreign policy actor, particularly in conflict response, military development, and state-building (e.g., Bono 2004; Kaldor et.al. 2007; Altunışık 2008; Olsen 2009; Hartel 2023). Scholars such as Bouris and Papadimitriou (2019) identify three stages of EU involvement in international crises: conflict prevention, management, and resolution. Within this context, especially after the Lisbon Treaty, scholars have noted an "effectiveness turn" in debates on EU actorness (Drieskens 2017: 1539).

Based on the existing literature, we argue that the increasingly volatile international environment, the EU's "geopolitical awakening," and its desire to speak the "language of power" had profound implications for its ability to exercise influence and maintain relevance in international affairs (European Parliament 2019). The EU's actorness is fundamentally shaped by its coherence (the capacity to speak with one voice) and effectiveness (the ability to influence others' actions). In what follows, we focus on the EU's coherence and effectiveness specifically within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The EU's actorness and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - 1970-2010

The European Union's engagement with the Palestinian issue has significantly transformed over the decades. In the early 1970s, the European Community (EC) began to recognize Palestinian rights, referring to the Palestinians as "a people" entitled to a "homeland" and the right to exercise "self-determination" (European Political Cooperation, 1973). Since then, the EC—

and later the EU—has regularly issued declarations concerning the Palestinian question. However, these statements have often faced criticism for their lack of follow-through and tangible impact. While the 1971 Schuman Paper reflected an emerging consensus among member states, it exposed ongoing divisions over contentious issues such as the status of refugees and Jerusalem. A more decisive moment came with the 1980 Venice Declaration, which represented the first unified and explicitly pro-Palestinian position adopted by the European Community. In the 1990s, institutional developments under the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) enhanced the EU's role in conflict resolution, driven partly by a desire to reduce energy dependency on the Middle East and shift toward soft security. The 1991 Madrid Peace Conference marked the start of the EU's practical involvement, mainly as a financial supporter of the peace, leaving political leadership to the US. The EU became a major donor to the Palestinians, primarily through its support for the Oslo Accords and projects like the Gaza airport, later destroyed by Israel. During this period, the EU prioritized effectiveness over coherence in its Middle East engagement, particularly fueled by the optimism of the Maastricht Treaty. The 1990s saw the EU intensify its involvement, particularly after the 1993 Oslo Accords, as it emerged as a major supporter of the peace process, contributing approximately 50% of the total aid to the Palestinians during that decade (EEAS 2000). This aid was instrumental in establishing the Palestinian Authority (PA) and supporting infrastructure development in the Palestinian territories. The EU's financial commitment underscored its belief in a two-state solution as the pathway to lasting peace.

As the Barcelona Process was initiated in 1995 and the EU's quest to increase partnership with the Mediterranean countries was given an impetus, the European aim of being an actor in the Middle East Peace Process was also underlined. Palestinian Authority was invited to the Barcelona Process as a full participant, creating new and unprecedented venues for political dialogue, confidence-building, and practical collaboration among Israelis, Palestinians, and their Arab and European neighbors (Soler i Lecha 2024: 121). Persson argues that the main objective of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership was to improve the Union's actorness in the peace process in

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political, economic and social-cultural terms (Persson 2015: 119) in general, where the EU tried to lead an independent peace process from the US, thus consolidating its power in Middle East politics. Through a European path, which emphasized the importance of supporting the democratic institutions and strengthening the rule of law and civil society, the EU was committed to engaging with the region and thus the Palestinians and the Israelis as a part of the Partnership (Schlumberger 2011: 140). In line with the decisions of the Amsterdam Treaty and the appointment of Javier Solana as the High Representative, the EU policy towards the peace process became more institutionalized in the late 1990s.

However, the euphoria of peace ended with the Oslo Peace Process's collapse and the al-Aqsa intifada's beginning in 2000. Although hopes for a negotiated peace and a solution based on two states with the creation of a Palestinian state were dashed, the EU continued to play a role as part of multilateral mechanisms, such as the Quartet, and by providing aid and support for institutional capacity building to the Palestinian Authority. As the situation in Palestine got worse, with the intifada and the impact of 9/11, the EU again issued a Declaration – the Sevilla Declaration in 2002 – where it emphasized the significance of multilateral frameworks to find a durable solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. It stated, "The Middle East crisis has reached a dramatic turning point. Further escalation will render the situation uncontrollable…There is an urgent need for political action by the whole international community. The Quartet has a key role in starting a peace process" (The Council of the European Union 2002). Yet, although this was a correct analysis of what was going on in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the time, the Sevilla Declaration remained a declaration – a statement regarding the situation with no further tools to change or affect its course.

The first time the EU went beyond issuing declarations and taking steps on the ground came when the EU Border Assistance Mission at the Rafah crossing point, code-named EUBAM Rafah, was established to monitor the operations of this border crossing point. As Israel unilaterally withdrew from Gaza in 2005, the EU took on the mission "to contribute to the opening of the crossing point and to build confidence between the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, in cooperation with the European Union's institution-building efforts" (The European Union 2010). With EUBAM Rafah, the EU changed its traditional policy of issuing declarations in reaction to developments on the ground. It came to the ground by deploying its security forces for crisis management and conflict resolution. This was a turning point in the CFSP, and it was the first military deployment under the command of a European general. Another EU mission under the CFSP was employed in the Palestinian territories named EUPOL COPPS (Coordination Office for Palestinian Police Support), in the same year. The EU defined EUPOL COPPS as an expression of the EU's continued readiness to support the Palestinian Authority in complying with its Roadmap obligations, particularly concerning "security" and "institution building".

Although the EU's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict began to increase, it was relatively short-lived as the 2006 legislative elections for the Palestinian Authority, which resulted in the victory of Hamas, became a game-changer. Both the EUBAM Rafah and the EUPOL COPPS were suspended. Having called the PA constantly for democracy and elections over the past years, the EU was faced with the dilemma of what to do when the democratic process brought to power undemocratic forces – Hamas – that refused to renounce terrorism. The EU foreign ministers put forward their concern "that the new Palestinian government has not committed itself to the three principles laid out by the Council and the Quartet: nonviolence, recognition of Israel's right to exist, and acceptance of existing agreements. It urged the new Palestinian government to meet and implement these three principles and to commit to President Abbas' platform of peace" (Council of the European Union 2006). The EU indicated compliance with these three principles as a condition for future financial aid and suspended aid to the Hamas-led Palestinian government after it refused to implement them. As Gaza became a new zone of conflict after 2007 (i.e., the expulsion of Hamas from the West Bank and the beginning of its control in Gaza), the EU began to talk to the Fatah-led PA in the West Bank, cutting ties to Gaza, and went back to its traditional policy of issuing declarations.

As the Israeli government began a military operation (Operation Cast Lead) against

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Hamas-led Gaza, the EU's criticism this time targeted Israel through declarations. The 2009 Goldstone report, announced after the Operation, pointed to Israeli non-compliance with international law and led to concerns in the European countries only to result in a few declarations on the issue (The United Nations 2009) As the tension over the occupied territories and especially Gaza continued, in December 2009, the Council of the European Union reaffirmed its stance based on a two-state solution, emphasizing that it "will not recognize any changes to the pre-1967 borders, including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those agreed by the parties" (Council of the European Union 2009). Over the years, the EU has consistently called for the cessation of Israeli settlement activities and has advocated for Jerusalem to serve as the capital of both Israel and a future Palestinian state, without having any effective tools to implement these calls.

The two dimensions of the EU's actorness after the Lisbon Treaty: Coherence and effectiveness at work?

Although the EU has arguably enhanced its capacity as a foreign policy actor, particularly in the areas of conflict prevention, resolution, and management following the 2009 Lisbon Treaty (Mueller 2013), its approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict throughout the 2010s remained cautious and strategically restrained. This measured engagement persisted despite institutional reforms that intended to strengthen the EU's external action capabilities.

The broader shift in EU foreign policy toward a more geopolitical and interest-driven orientation, particularly under the European Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen in 2019, has further complicated the Union's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This evolution reflects a move from a purely normative, values-based foreign policy to one increasingly shaped by realpolitik considerations, including security imperatives and the ambition to assert strategic influence in a multipolar world.

Nowhere is this tension more evident than in the EU's response to the Abraham Accords—a series of normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states brokered by the United States in 2020. While hailed internationally as historic progress toward regional peace, the Accords effectively marginalized the Palestinian issue, thereby challenging the EU's long-standing position on the necessity of a negotiated two-state solution. The EU's response was characteristically cautious: it welcomed the normalization steps. Still, it simultaneously reiterated that a comprehensive resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains essential for sustainable peace in the region.

Coherence

In the intergovernmental framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the EU's ability to formulate coherent external action hinges on the convergence of member states' national foreign policies—an obligation formally enshrined in the Treaties (Wessel 2000; Hillion 2008). However, achieving coherence in EU foreign policy remains a persistent challenge. Despite the Lisbon Treaty's ambition to present a "One Voice Europe," divergent national interests and political stances among member states, particularly regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, have repeatedly constrained the EU's ability to act collectively and decisively.

The EU's claim to act as a unified foreign policy actor—often referred to as "One-Voice Europe"—was critically tested during the 2012 UN General Assembly vote on granting Palestine "non-member observer status." The vote revealed stark internal divisions: sixteen EU member states supported the resolution, several abstained, and the Czech Republic voted against it. This failure to vote as a unified bloc highlighted the EU's lack of coherence on the Palestinian issue and undermined its credibility as a foreign policy actor, despite the European Parliament's explicit call to back the High Representative's efforts to revive the peace process (European Parliament 2012). The outcome of the vote demonstrated that national foreign policy preferences continue to override common EU positions, contrary to the commitments enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty.

Throughout the 2010s, the EU's coherence on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was further strained by internal contestation, particularly

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regarding the designation and political role of Hamas. A significant point of contention within the EU, especially in the European Parliament, was how to address Hamas in the context of proposed Palestinian unity governments. These debates came to the forefront during key moments in 2011 and 2014, when initiatives for Palestinian reconciliation that aimed to bring Fatah and Hamas together in a unity government surfaced (Lococq 2020: 370). Such internal disagreements impeded the EU's ability to speak with one voice and limited its capacity to respond consistently to developments on the ground.

Coherence also becomes problematic regarding the issue of recognition of Palestinian statehood and the relations with Israel. For example, France, Sweden, and Ireland have historically been more vocal in their criticism of Israeli policies, especially concerning settlements and human rights violations in the occupied territories. They have called for a stronger EU position in support of Palestinian statehood and against Israeli policies that undermine the two-state solution. Sweden was the first EU member to officially recognize the State of Palestine in 2014. In contrast, some other member states, such as Germany, Austria, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, have maintained close relations with Israel, emphasizing its right to security and opposing any policy that might hinder close ties with Israel. Germany, in particular, due to its history, has been a staunch defender of Israel in many EU institutions, often advocating for a more cautious and balanced approach to the conflict. Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, the Visegrád Group, also consistently veto more substantial criticisms and condemnations of Israeli actions by the EU. This fragmentation once again became explicit with the 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel and the ensuing War on Gaza.

Following the Hamas attacks, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen issued several statements expressing strong support for Israel and condemning the violence. On the day of the attacks, von der Leyen stated: "I unequivocally condemn the attack carried out by Hamas terrorists against Israel. It is terrorism in its most despicable form. Israel has the right to defend itself against such heinous attacks." Flying to Israel on 13 September and visiting the Kfar Azza kibbutz, she said: "What

I saw and what I heard is breaking my heart. The blood of people killed in their sleep. The stories of innocents burned alive or slaughtered in their homes. The parents hiding their newborn babies before confronting the terrorists. Children and elderly people were ripped from their families and taken hostage, even Holocaust survivors. Over 1,300 human beings were murdered by barbaric terrorists of Hamas fighting against Israel" (European Commission 2023).

Standing alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, she added: "Israel has the right to defend itself". Her remarks created a heated discussion in the EU as some EU member states and officials felt that her stance lacked balance and failed to address the humanitarian situation in Gaza adequately. As the Gaza War began, not only did the number of deaths, primarily children and women, reach unprecedented numbers, but also the humanitarian situation turned into a deep crisis. The division in the EU, with divergent member states' positions, became striking. Over 800 EU staff members signed a letter criticizing von der Leyen's 'uncontrolled' support for Israel, arguing that it misrepresented the EU's position and failed to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Ireland and Spain expressed discontent, called for reviews of the EU's association agreement with Israel in light of human rights concerns, and in a bold move, recognized the Palestinian state in May 2024, with Slovenia following in June 2024. Belgium and Malta also gave messages supporting a ceasefire and international legal action against Israel, given the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza.

Contrary to these states' positions, some EU members gave strong pro-Israeli messages. For example, Germany's Scholz said Germany's place was at Israel's side; Austria raised the Israeli flags on government buildings and cut funding for Palestine-related organizations; Czech Republic labelled Hamas a terrorist group and vigorously defended Israeli actions; Hungary blocked critical EU statements on Israel and underlined a "unequivocal support" for Israel; Italy's Meloni emphasized Israel's right to self-defense and avoided joining early ceasefire; Poland emphasized support for Israel and rejected genocide claims; Netherlands gave a strong condemnation of Hamas and defended Israel's right to self-defense and also

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was skeptical of recognizing Palestine. Some other member states' positions either shifted in time, for example, France initially took a pro-Israel stance, yet later, with developments in Gaza, became critical; Sweden, Portugal, Finland, and Luxembourg pointed to humanitarian concerns, yet refrained from taking a firm stance. The division on the issue was also seen in the EU institutions. Against the Commission's von der Leyen's pro-Israeli statements, the European Council's Charles Michel criticized von der Leyen for acting unilaterally while emphasizing consensus and balance. European Parliament was split across party lines, with some MEPs demanding more substantial criticism of Israel and others backing it fully.

The divided stance of the EU on this issue is a good example of the weakness of the one voice Europe claims. Lack of coherence on the issue not only pushes the Palestinian issue lower on the foreign policy agenda of the EU but also, without doubt, limits any actorness.

Effectiveness

Despite having a broad array of foreign policy instruments, the EU has consistently struggled to translate its potential into practical action. Most academic analyses agree that the Union's efforts remain largely ineffective due to institutional fragmentation, lack of political will, and competing national interests among member states (Akgül-Açıkmeşe and Özel 2024: 61). This disconnection between capacity and impact continues to challenge the EU's credibility and influence in the Israeli-Palestinian context.

While the EU has made strides in enhancing its international presence and articulating a common vision for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it continues to struggle with translating its foreign policy instruments into a cohesive and effective strategy (Müller 2012: 2). What it can do seems to be reacting to developments on the ground rather than shaping them; following and complementing US policy; and issuing declarations. This persistent ineffectiveness is recognized in the academic literature and by key regional stakeholders.

Müller's study, based on elite interviews conducted in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Ramallah in 2016 and 2017, reveals that both Israeli and Palestinian elites perceive a stark gap between the EU's peacebuilding ambitions and its actual performance (Müller 2019: 264). Among Israeli elites, there is a recurring skepticism toward the EU's self-image as a unified actor with a coherent normative agenda. They frequently challenge the EU's claim to speak with one voice, pointing to the rise of far-right populist parties in specific member states as evidence of internal dissonance between EU institutions and national governments. As one Israeli politician put it, "nationalism is becoming more popular and human rights are being shoved into a corner" (cited in Müller 2019: 259).

Palestinian elites echo this sentiment. Civil society actors in particular view the EU as an "underutilized power"—or worse, a hypocritical actor. While the EU vocally promotes democratic values, human rights, and respect for international law, it is widely seen as failing to take substantive action to protect Palestinian rights or hold Israel accountable (Müller 2019: 262).

The dissonance between rhetoric and action undermined the EU's credibility for some time. It reinforced such perceptions of it as a passive or selectively engaged actor in the conflict for the past decades, issuing declarations as reactions to the developments and following the US's leadership if needed to act. Why has the EU not been able to perform better while trying to increase its actorness? It has enough experience and knowledge to handle this decades-long conflict. What prevents it from playing effective roles?

One reason was developments in the Palestinian issue rather than with the EU. The decreasing importance of the Palestinian issue in the 2010s in the regional agenda has curbed the urgency to solve it for many international actors. The ensuing developments of the Arab Spring pushed the Palestinian issue to the back burner for some time. The EU, on the one hand, had to respond to the Arab masses taking to the streets calling for regime change and dignity, and on the other, had to respond to the emerging civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen that brought an imminent refugee crisis. The EU responded to these challenges with what was coined as the 3 Ms: money, market, and mobility, where mobility was the most

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problematic to grant. Adopting a "more-for-more" approach, providing more resources to countries that managed to make more progress and reform, the EU's role remained relatively restrained, highlighting the security risks the uprisings caused in Europe's neighborhood.

While juggling with the refugee crises, in which the EU was somewhat unprepared and unable to respond effectively, when the EU had to respond to the developments in the Palestinian issue, it was mostly reactionary, reacting rather than shaping policy, where shaping policy was mainly left for the US. The US started renewed peace negotiations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in July 2013, and Israeli settlements emerged as a significant obstacle to peace. Under pressure from the international community to cut back on settlement activity in the occupied Palestinian territories, Israel, to the contrary, approved new housing in East Jerusalem and the West Bank and announced the building of 3500 new units in the coming months. This brought intense criticism towards Israel. The EU issued guidelines for Israel to ensure the respect of EU positions and commitments conforming to international law. The EU made it clear that it does not recognize the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as part of Israeli territory. Therefore, the EU's Foreign Affairs Council underlined the importance of limiting the application of agreements with Israel to the territory of Israel, as recognized by the EU. Hence, the failure to meet these guidelines would result in the prohibition of grants, prizes, and financial instruments from the EU to the Israeli settlements in the occupied territories (The European Union 2013). Although the guidelines were important in showing the EU commitment to a future two-state solution, with the creation of a Palestinian state in the occupied territories of West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital, they did not change much on the ground to prevent Israeli settlement activity or encourage the dialogue with the Palestinian Authority. The EU returned to its traditional policy of issuing declarations and guidelines but remained short of making any change.

In the following period, as the settlement activity continued, the announcement of the then-U.S. President Donald Trump in December 2017 came as another turning point in the conflict and the EU's role. Trump's announcement on the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, diverging from the longstanding international consensus on the city, triggered international responses, with the EU among the most prominent voices opposing it. The EU's official response emphasized that the status of Jerusalem should be determined through negotiations between Israel and Palestine, in line with United Nations Security Council resolutions. The EU reiterated its position that the city should serve as the capital for both states, Israel and a future Palestinian state. High Representative Federica Mogherini underscored the EU's reaction, stating that the union would continue to "respect the international consensus" on Jerusalem's status and "not follow the United States in its decision." This was interesting as the EU, which was complementing the US's political role in the issue, was shaken. Following 2017, the EU repeatedly condemned any unilateral declarations or actions regarding Jerusalem, calling for shared governance that respects the city's significance to all three Abrahamic faiths. Despite the condemnations, the EU was once again limited in its capacity to counterbalance the actions effectively. This revealed the EU's constraints as an effective foreign policy actor, particularly in a geopolitical environment increasingly dominated by US unilateralism and shifting alliances in the Middle East. Despite opposing Trump's policies, the EU failed to present a unified and forceful alternative vision. Internal divisions within the EU—especially between countries with closer ties to Israel (such as Hungary and Austria) and those more critical of Israeli policies (such as Ireland and Sweden)—further limited collective action.

The 7 October events and the ensuing War on Gaza found an EU that already had limited effectiveness, as the examples show. The Hamas attacks on Israel on 7 October further put the EU's actorness in the Palestinian issue to the test. Despite the divergent messages from different EU member states and the EU institutions, diplomatically, the EU has tried to engage with both the Israeli and the Palestinian leaders to broker ceasefires and promote dialogue. However, this humanitarian role was largely overshadowed by the EU's limited ability to play a political role or assert influence on the parties. One can also argue that even if the EU acted coherently and

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effectively, the actors involved in the issue crowd out the EU. There are not only the regional actors actively involved in the ceasefire negotiations, like Egypt, Qatar, and Türkiye, but also the US position in the Gaza War, which might not be in line with the EU position at this time.

The newly elected Trump administration has the potential to challenge decades of conventional policy in the Middle East, significantly altering its long-held commitment to the two-state solution (Noll 2024). This would come as a severe shock to the EU and its member states, which have traditionally positioned themselves alongside the United States as equal defenders of the two-state solution outlined in the Oslo Accords and would fundamentally shake the Union's claim of "actorness" in the conflict (Noll 2024). It is true that the EU still plays a significant role in the economic and humanitarian dimension of the conflict, and it has continued for decades to provide substantial aid to Palestinian civilians affected by the conflict. It has engaged with international partners to coordinate relief efforts.

Nevertheless, the fact that Oliver Varhelyi, the then EU Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, right after the 7 October attack announced the suspension of development aid for Palestine, which adds up to over €1 billion for the period 2021-2024, put a bold question mark on the reliability of this aid and EU's humanitarian roles (The Guardian 2023). At a general level, the latest developments significantly highlight the persistent tension between the EU's humanitarian commitments and its geopolitical limitations, particularly when dealing with protracted and deeply entrenched conflicts like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The only area where the EU can have effectiveness – economic and humanitarian aid – also seems to be waning under these circumstances, further weakening the EU's actorness.

Conclusion and Recommendations

For several decades, the EU's actorness on the international stage has created a prolific debate. One often asked question about EU actorness is the European capacity to act as an international actor. Indeed, while facing many political, economic, and social challenges, the Union has not stopped stressing its desire to act as a global actor. However, many observers continue to highlight the lack of its international capacity compared to the expectations it creates in Europe and worldwide. Regarding the EU's actorness in the Palestinian issue, its role has been limited to the economic and humanitarian spheres.

In a nutshell, since the 1970s, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been characterized by the limitations of the EU's approach to and policies on the issue, which usually remained reactive, limited to humanitarian issues when on the ground. It can hardly be translated into political roles, which the US has historically championed. The EU has followed chiefly the US position on the issue and, when not in compliance with the policies of the first Trump administration, lacked the tools to revise the steps or implement alternative paths to peace. The most significant reason for this has been member states' fragmentation and divergent foreign policy stances vis-à-vis the conflict.

The 7 October attack also split the EU institutions. Whereas European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen projected the Israeli flag on the Commission's headquarter buildings and stressed Israel's "right to defend itself today and in the days to come", European Council President Charles Michel emphasized the need for the European Union to avoid double standards in its approach to the conflict, stressing the primacy of the international law (Konecky 2024).

It is also vital to consider how the EU's struggle for "actorness" in the region is perceived by European citizens, who are allegedly at the center of all EU decisions. For example, according to an October 2024 public opinion poll in the Netherlands, 55 percent of the public thought the Dutch government should be more critical of Israel, and only 6 percent said it should be more supportive (cited in Konecny 2024). Similarly, a January 2024 poll showed that 61 percent of Germans thought Israel's military action in Gaza was not justified, given the many civilian victims (as cited in Konecny 2024).

The EU's actorness debate should also consider

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how the Europeans take it across different geographies and cases. This is of vital importance given the fact that the EU is on the brink of a new geopolitical enlargement with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which have been given the EU candidacy status in 2022 and 2023, respectively. Enlargement now has a geostrategic meaning for the EU, which would provide the Union with the leverage to remain an influential player in a rapidly changing global landscape and protect the EU's malleable borders. Thus, we will hear more about this "actorness" debate, resonating with the Palestinian issue.

To address its internal divisions and enhance its role as a geopolitical actor, the EU should consider the following policy measures:

- Develop a unified policy framework: Establish more straightforward guidelines to ensure coherence in member states' positions on the Palestinian issue, preventing contradictory diplomatic approaches.

- Engagement with all relevant actors: While maintaining its principles, the EU should adopt a pragmatic approach to engagement with all Palestinian factions to facilitate dialogue and conflict resolution.

- Strengthen diplomatic mediation efforts: Enhance its role as a mediator by leveraging its economic influence and historical ties to push for renewed peace negotiations.

- Promote balanced economic relations: Ensure that its economic partnerships with Israel and Palestine align with international legal standards, including human rights considerations.

- Support democratic processes consistently: Reaffirm its commitment to democracy by supporting free elections in Palestine, regardless of the outcome.

- Take the "actorness" debate seriously: With its recent preoccupation with the enlargement process, which has a more geostrategic take on than ever,

the EU should consider that its actorness will soon be questioned in these countries and elsewhere. In this respect, the EU must develop a broader perspective regarding "actorness" and note that the Bloc cannot be a serious foreign policy actor if it lacks coherence and effectiveness regarding the Palestinian issue. The Russian occupation of Ukraine and the political interference of Russia in Moldova and Georgia are real, as is Israel bombing the hospitals and schools in Gaza, and they are all related to the EU's (potentially lack of) foreign policy "actorness".

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