



The Israeli-Palestinian conflict: what the EU can do to help facilitate long-awaited peace

In brief

This paper provides a brief outline of the ongoing conflict between Palestine and Israel, and recommends some ways in which the EU can act to alleviate the suffering of people in the region. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is multifaceted and complex. It is rooted in the 1947 plan to partition the then British Mandate Palestine into Arab and Jewish states; the subsequent establishment of the state of Israel in 1948; and the ensuing war which displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians as refugees. Following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip and annexed East Jerusalem. Despite all the attention and support that the conflict has received over the years, and despite recent efforts by US Secretary of State John Kerry to restart the peace process, there was an escalation of the conflict in the Gaza Strip in June 2014 that resulted in the loss of more than 2,200 lives, mostly Gazan. The aim of this briefing note is to highlight the importance of the EU maintaining a continuous and active role in furthering the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP). Amidst the many security challenges that the EU faces in today's world, it is essential for the EU to maintain a focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to fulfill its responsibility to protect people in neighbouring countries from atrocities and human rights violations.

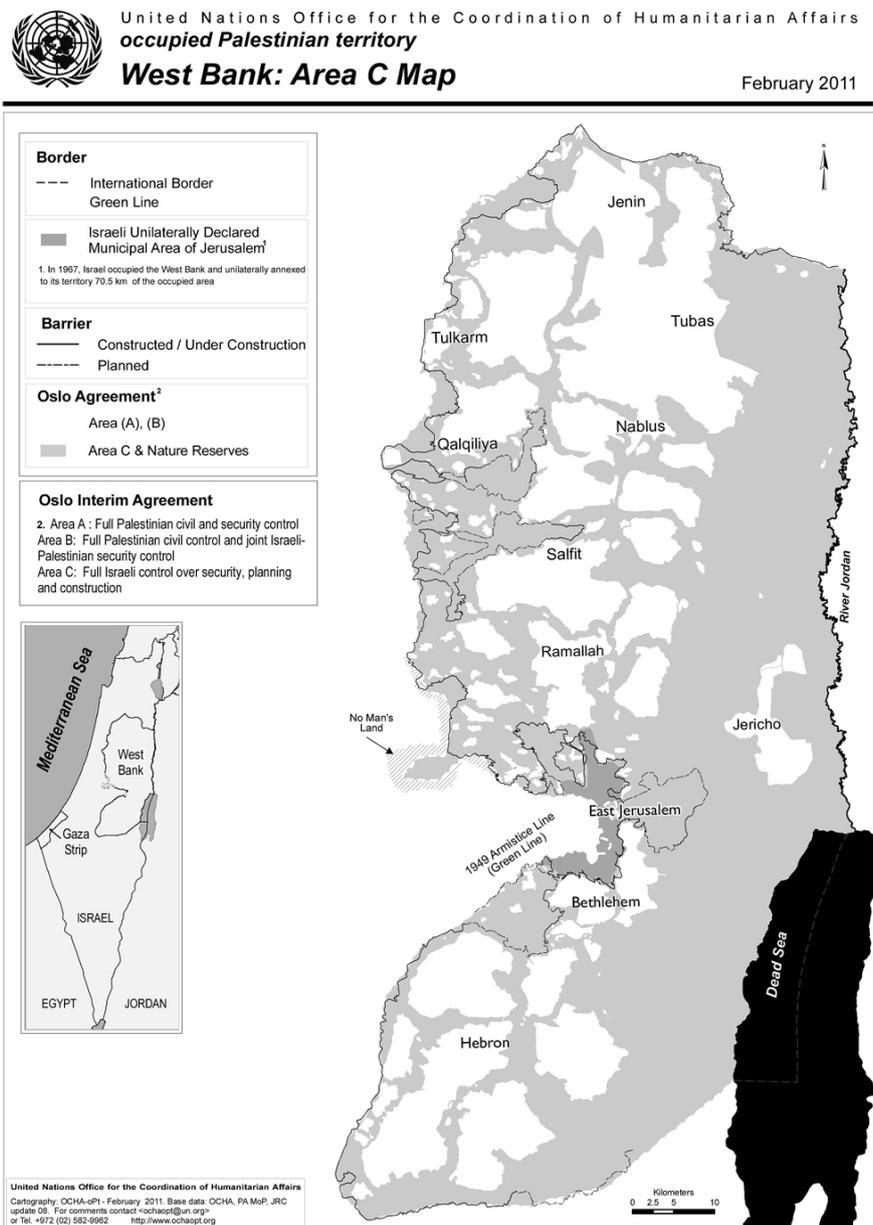
Palestine (the West Bank and the Gaza Strip)

During the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the Palestinian exodus, known as the Nakba, meaning “catastrophe”, occurred, when more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs fled or were expelled from their homes. In 1949 the “Green Line” was established. This demarcation line was based on the Armistice agreements between Israel and its neighbours, which ended the hostilities of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. In June 1967, during the Six Day War, Israel seized East Jerusalem and the West Bank from Jordan and Gaza from Egypt. This resulted in the occupation of Palestine which facilitated the establishment of illegal settlements on Palestinian soil. The de facto borders of Israel and Palestine have changed over time and are the subject of intense debate, as is the status of Jerusalem, and the right to return of Palestinian refugees who may have last lived in their own land more than 60 years ago.

The first Palestinian intifada (uprising), which started in 1987, ended with the signature of the Oslo Accords negotiated by the Israelis and Palestinians in the mid-1990s. The Oslo Accords divided the West Bank into a patchwork of areas with varying administrative status. In Area A the Palestinian Authority (PA) has full control over civilian and security issues; in Area B the PA has full civilian control but joint security control with the Israelis; and in Area C, the largest division in the West Bank comprising 60% of the territory, Israelis have full civilian and security control. Area C includes the Jordan Valley (except for Jericho), which is important for agriculture and trade. Most of the natural resources of the West Bank are in Area C.

To some extent, the Oslo Accords were successful in granting a certain degree of freedom and clarity over who has control over which area, but they also created severe problems for Palestinians. Administrative restrictions include extremely limited permission to build. The World Bank has noted the strangling effect of the administrative restrictions on economic activity and potential for development in Area C. Almost all Israeli settlements, which are mainly in Area C, are being expanded by settlers and encouraged by Israeli government policy. This is the most blatant infringement of international law regarding occupation. In addition, unfairness in access to infrastructure, including water supplies, is most obvious in Area C, where about 70% of Palestinian villages are not connected to the water network.

Between 2000 and 2005, during the second intifada, the Israeli government started building a separation barrier between Israel and the West Bank and Gaza. This wall has deprived Palestinians of freedom of movement and easy access to health, education, places of worship, and other services, considerably lowering their quality of life. Last but not least, the division of governance between Hamas in the Gaza strip and Fatah in the West Bank since 2007, and the listing of Hamas as a terrorist organisation by members of the international community (including the EU, despite a December 2014 ruling by the General Court of the European Union that this should be removed), are further stalling peace negotiations.



Credit: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2011

Israel

Israeli people believe that they have a right to maintain a homeland for the Jewish people, culture, language and religion, in which they can live in peace and security. Jews currently comprise 75% of the Israeli population. Jews from anywhere in the world have the right to acquire Israeli citizenship: in 2014, there were 26,500 immigrants. In 2013 immigrants came to Israel mainly from the former Soviet Union, France, the US and Canada, and Ethiopia.

The perpetuation of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict causes a lot of problems for Israeli citizens. Life in the area around Ashkelon, which borders Gaza, is disrupted by air raid sirens and rocket attacks. Life is also hard for Palestinians living in Israel, with divisions between people with and without Israeli citizenship or residence permits. There are 176 unrecognised villages in Israel, mainly in the north around Galilee and the Negev. These villages are inhabited by more than 90,000 Palestinians (including Palestinian Bedouins) who became internally displaced persons when the state of Israel was established. Their homes often lack proper access to water, electricity, transport, sanitation, education, or health care. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's policy has halted the process of recognition of Palestinian villages, resulting in the treatment of residents as second-class citizens. Netanyahu has been heavily criticised by the international community over the way he is dealing with the conflict. And, despite his victory in the recent elections, there is a strong movement within Israel against his policies on illegal settlements and his reluctance to proceed with peace negotiations. Voters respond to many factors: the economy and the cost of living were, once again, the main issues for voters in 2015.

The role of the EU

The EU is fully committed to facilitating a two-state solution with a democratic, viable and independent Palestinian state existing alongside the state of Israel. The EU, alongside the UN, the US, and the Russian Federation, is part of the "Quartet" which was established in 2002 in order to help mediate Middle East peace negotiations. The main areas of work for the Quartet are:

- The initiative for the Palestinian economy, which aims to create thousands of new jobs;
- Movement and Access, which aims to deliver greater movement and access for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza;
- Area C development, facilitating Palestinian access to economic enterprise and investment;
- East Jerusalem which aims to improve living conditions for all Palestinians, who suffer because of a lack of housing and school facilities;
- Gaza strip, promoting the reconstruction and development of Gaza;
- PA Fiscal Support, supporting the financing of the PA and the establishment of a financially viable state; and,
- The Rule of Law, supporting the Palestinians in strengthening the rule of law.

The Quartet is working towards the creation of a stronger Palestine with the aim of maintaining peace and security in the region. However, the Quartet does not only represent a collective European voice, because it includes representatives from other regions and organisations.

The European Commission (EC) is the biggest donor of financial assistance to the Palestinians. Between 2007 and 2013, Palestine received through the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) €300 million per year for financial support, support to the refugees, and development programmes. The European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), amongst other EC instruments, will be the biggest funding source for Palestine during 2014-2020. A distinction, however, needs to be drawn between the EU's role as a donor to the PA and its political role in the MEPP. While the EU is the main funder of Palestine, it needs to also play a stronger mediation role. Furthermore, whilst the US has invested great efforts in re-launching peace negotiations between the two sides, the failure of the US also shows the limitations of the US' ability to act as a mediator in the conflict.

The EU's two civilian missions, EUPOL COPPS and EUBAM RAFAH, continue to support reform in the Palestinian police, strengthen the rule of law, and improve security in the region. A continued presence on the ground is important for the credibility of the EU as a security actor and an equal partner in the resolution of the conflict.

Recommendations

- The EU should support more actively the Arab Peace Initiative which was proposed by the Arab League in 2002 and re-endorsed in 2007. The EU should encourage the Arab countries to revisit the declaration in order to open a new path for negotiation with the Israeli government.
- The EU should support more actively the Geneva Initiative of 2003 which is based on a mutual Israeli-Palestinian declaration and a recognition that both nations have a right to be independent and viable states. The EU should promote the Geneva Initiative as a basis for peace negotiations alongside the Arab Peace Initiative.
- The EU should put added pressure on Israel to pay the tax revenues which are owed to the PA, so that the PA is then able to fund the reconstruction of Gaza and deal with the humanitarian crisis. These tax revenues are currently being withheld by Israel as punishment for the PA's decision to join the International Criminal Court (ICC). Palestine's accession to the ICC means that it is able to file war-crime suits against Israel as of 1st April 2015.
- The EU should be implementing the labelling of all products sourced from illegal settlements in the West Bank, so that EU consumers can choose to buy goods from Israel but not from the illegal settlements.
- The EU should put added pressure on its own Member States to stop the export of arms and military equipment to both Palestine and Israel.

Further reading

- On Nakba day: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1948_Palestinian_exodus
- On the Oslo Accords: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oslo_Accords
- On the blockade of the Gaza Strip: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blockade_of_the_Gaza_Strip
- On the EU and the Middle East Peace Process: http://www.eeas.europa.eu/mepp/index_en.htm
- On the Arab Peace Initiative: <http://middleeast.about.com/od/arabisraeliconflict/qt/beirut-declaration-text.htm>
- On the Geneva Initiative: <http://www.geneva-accord.org/mainmenu/geneva-initiativeisrael-palestine-permanent-borders>
- On Palestine joining the ICC: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/17/us-icc-palestinians-examination-idUSKBN0KP1PR20150117>
- On labelling products from illegal settlements: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-eu-foreign-policy-chiefs-letter-on-settlement-labeling/>
- On arms exports: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/aug/12/british-arms-exports-israel-gaza-block-suspension>

QCEA's approach on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict:

“Our approach is based on the firm belief that all people have a right to exist in peace and security. It follows that both Israelis and Palestinians must be guaranteed this right. Whether this is in two separate states or in one state, it must be based on a viable state, within secure borders, where equality for all is guaranteed and where democratic participation is available to all citizens. Our approach is based on a firm belief in non-violence; we do not nor will we ever condone violence on the part of anyone: individuals, groups, or states.”

QCEA briefing papers aim to give recommendations to EU policy makers with the essential background context.

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