



Beyond firefighting: An EU strategy for Gaza

by Beth Oppenheim

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The EU should respond more robustly to the recent violence in Gaza. The Trump administration is not a credible mediator; the EU should step in.

[Israeli](#) and [Palestinian](#) leaders warn they are on the cusp of war in Gaza. Rockets and mortar shells are being exchanged at the highest rate since the 2014 war, after peaceful protests at the Gaza border [spiralled](#) into violence in May. The situation in Gaza is deteriorating, and international actors are doing little to improve it. With the US administration behaving [destructively](#) in the region, the EU cannot afford to sit back – it should take the initiative.

The EU's first priority must be to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, which breeds discontent, radicalism and violence. But firefighting alone is insufficient. The EU needs a strategy to address the roots of conflict. It should go beyond aid, taking action on three fronts: encouraging an end to the blockade by reviving an EU presence at the Gaza border; offering greater support to Fatah-Hamas reconciliation and democratic elections; and exerting pressure on Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Relief

The Israeli-Egyptian strategy of cornering Hamas has failed. In 2007, Hamas violently took control of the Gaza Strip from the PA. Since then, the Strip has been under blockade by Israel and Egypt, and sanctions by the PA (which still controls the West Bank). The blockade means that border crossings with Israel and Egypt are largely closed.

A UN report predicts the Strip will be uninhabitable by 2020. [Ninety-five per cent](#) of Gazan tap water is undrinkable, and its beaches are choked with untreated sewage. Electricity is available for just [four hours a day](#). Unemployment is at [44 per cent](#). The UN's Palestine Refugee Agency (UNWRA) provides essential services: it supplies food to [1 million](#) of the 1.8 million Gazans, runs 267 schools (the only secular schooling in the Strip), and 21 health centres. US President Donald Trump has announced a cut of [\\$305 million](#) in support to UNWRA, which will result in school closures. Without other choices, Gazan children will be sent to mosques, many of which preach radical Islam, or Hamas will set up its own schools. Last

week, Trump's senior adviser Jared Kushner and his team went on a fundraising mission for Gaza in the Gulf, which seems inconsistent given the administration's cut to aid.

The EU must continue to provide relief to Gaza. The EU is the [second largest](#) donor to UNWRA, and the Commission responded to Trump's cuts by [pledging](#) a further €42.5 million. Hamas's rule is threatened by the crisis: its support stands at just [32 per cent in the Strip](#). But its survival is necessary for both Israel's and Egypt's security. Hamas constrains more extreme political forces, [cracking down](#) on jihadist movements which it perceives as a threat to its authority.

But if the EU provides aid without other measures, it will release Israel from its legal obligation to provide relief as an occupying power. Aid alone will merely mitigate the humanitarian cost of the blockade, without tackling the underlying causes. [Most](#) relief is directed towards meeting basic needs, rather than to the sustainable development of the Gazan economy. The EU needs to go further and put pressure on Israel, Egypt and the PA to end the blockade and sanctions. The EU's foreign affairs representative, Federica Mogherini, should be more explicit in linking the protests with the blockade – this has been largely absent from recent speeches by her and her spokesperson.

Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his defence minister Avigdor Lieberman both refuse to take any action that could help Hamas, even indirectly. Hamas is recognised as a terrorist organisation by Israel, the EU, US and Canada. The organisation uses Gazan schools and hospitals as [military bases](#), and the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) [argues](#) that Hamas uses foreign aid to build tunnels for terrorist activity and military supplies.

But even the Israeli defence establishment has argued that the blockade should be eased. They suggest a generous relief package, which would include the provision of electricity and water, a sewage system, infrastructure and work permits in Israel. Senior Israeli security officials have been [warning](#) since early 2016 that "continually deteriorating infrastructure brings the risk of an uncontrollable blow-up in the Strip". Israeli public opinion also supports relief: [two-thirds](#) of Israelis think their government's policy in Gaza has worsened security, and 69 per cent believe that it is in Israel's interest to improve living conditions in Gaza.

The Israeli government faces a dilemma: it knows its strategy is failing and is unpopular with the broader public and [defence establishment](#), but its core supporters remain committed to the blockade. Mogherini could instruct EU officials to exploit this gap between wider public opinion and government policy, by emphasising that the blockade makes Israel less secure.

An EU presence at the border might provide the necessary reassurance to end the blockade. In 2005, when Israel and the PA agreed limited free movement for Palestinians, an EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) was set up. This mission of unarmed border police and customs officers supported the PA in monitoring the reopened Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt. It was a success: a total of [443,975](#) people crossed the border under the Mission's mandate, and it provided relief from the desperate conditions in Gaza – until it was closed in 2007 when Hamas took over the Strip. The European Council has continued to renew the mandate of EUBAM, and retained a headquarters and some staff. This mandate expires at the end of June, and the Council could take the opportunity to renew and expand it. An expanded mandate was proposed by the Council in [2015](#), and Washington looks [poised](#) to propose a reopening of Israel and Egypt's crossings as part of its Middle East plan.

Indeed, the EU should offer to position its observers not only at the Egypt-Gaza border, but also at the Erez and Kerem Shalom crossings between Gaza and Israel. The EU has focused too much on re-opening the Rafah crossing at the expense of confronting Israeli and PA sanctions. An arrangement that only allows access into Egypt would allow Israel to pass responsibility for Gazans onto Egypt, and entrench the partition of Palestine by preventing Gazans from entering the Israeli and West Bank economies. As with Rafah in 2005-7, the PA could manage the crossings under EU supervision, and Israel would have access to the EU's CCTV. Israel could continue to control its side of Erez and Kerem Shalom, with EU supervision.

Such an arrangement was tantalisingly close in early 2018. Rafah was almost reopened with a revived PA-EU presence, as part of negotiations between Hamas and the PA, which later collapsed. A genuine EU offer to strictly monitor weapons smuggling could persuade Egypt, Israel and the PA to re-open the crossings, as all three share an interest in disarming Hamas. The EU should offer support to Egypt in intercepting smuggled weapons from Sudan, Libya, and the Red Sea; and provide counter-smuggling training to the PA.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, the secular nationalist party which controls the PA, would be crucial to any PA presence in Gaza. Full reconciliation looks a way off, but the EU should help prepare the groundwork. The two parties have clashed over tactics since Hamas's inception in 1987. Hamas advocates armed resistance, while Fatah renounced violence in 1993. In 2006, Hamas defeated Fatah in parliamentary elections across Palestine. Fatah was expelled from the Strip by Hamas in an armed conflict the following year.

Egypt is the only potential broker between the two sides, but Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of the PA, refuses to co-operate. It was Abbas who derailed the reunion talks in February with unrealistic [demands](#) to "control everything [in Gaza], including money and weapons". The EU and international actors have been too deferential to Abbas out of fear that his authority in the West Bank could decline further, leaving the territory vulnerable to extremism. But the EU should push Abbas to compromise, and criticise him for reaching a reconciliation deal but failing to implement it.

Gazans have no democratic means of expression: there have been no elections since 2006, and Hamas meets dissent with [torture](#). Nonetheless, the EU should end its impractical 'no-contact' policy with Hamas, as part of an effort to bring about national elections for the whole of Palestine, uniting the geographically divided Gaza and West Bank.

The EU should also reach out to Hamas [moderates](#) and provide a confidential channel for Hamas-Fatah dialogue, as well as Hamas-Israel dialogue (if and when Israel is willing). Hamas has made gestures towards moderation. Last spring, it released new [principles](#) acknowledging the 1967 borders which formed the basis of past peace talks with Israel, and diluting some of its anti-Semitic language – though without recognising Israel. "To the world, our message is: Hamas is not radical. We are a pragmatic and civilized movement", [said](#) its spokesperson. Whether this shift in tone translates into action remains to be seen, but the EU will only find out through engagement.

Sanctions

The EU should criticise Abbas for his [sanctions](#) on Gaza, including the suspension of salary payments to PA officials there, as the UN has [done](#). The EU possesses economic leverage, as the largest donor to the PA, and diplomatic leverage as a mediator in the PA's difficult relationships with its Arab neighbours and the US.

[Hamas](#) and its financiers, for instance the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard](#) in Iran and its Qod force, are already sanctioned by the EU. Strengthening sanctions on Hamas at this stage could backfire. In the past, when sanctions were imposed after Hamas had taken conciliatory steps, they only empowered radical elements and weakened moderates.

As Israel's largest trading partner, the EU has leverage over Israel. The two have an association agreement, which provides tariff-free trade in most goods, conditional upon respect for human rights and democratic principles. Trade with the EU accounts for [34 per cent](#) of Israel's exports, and almost 40 per cent of its imports.

The EU repeatedly shies away from attaching conditions to the relationship, arguing this will only drive Israel away. After the Gaza War in 2008-09, the EU showed its disapproval towards Israel by cancelling part of a planned upgrade of the Israel-EU relationship. But the EU decided to deepen co-operation soon after 2009, reaching new agreements on aviation, pharmaceuticals, data and agriculture.

There is no consensus among member-states on a coercive European strategy towards Israel. Netanyahu has [drawn upon](#) shared illiberal and nativist tendencies with the Visegrád countries (despite concerns around anti-Semitism), and the [energy interests](#) of Greece and Cyprus. Cancelling current modes of co-operation would antagonise Israel and require consensus among the member-states that would be hard to achieve. But the EU could make some demands in exchange for any upgrade to the relationship with Israel. The EU is currently designing its research and innovation programme for 2021-27: it should make future co-operation contingent on changes to Israel's policies towards Gaza. Such a step has worked in the past. In 2013, the EU excluded Israeli projects undertaken in the Occupied Palestinian Territories from its research and innovation programme, Horizon 2020. This provoked an outcry from the research community and the public, who recognised the "[price tag](#)" of their government's policies, and pressured Netanyahu to concede and [sign](#) the Horizon 2020 agreement.

The European Union can alleviate suffering in Gaza with a combination of relief, reconciliation and sanctions. [Israel](#), [the US](#) and [the UN](#) are all formulating their plans for Gaza. The EU cannot be absent from the conversation. It must use its voice.

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