A fatal message

Given the current escalation, calls for a cessation of aid to the Palestinians are not only counterproductive but downright dangerous

Following Hamas's horrific attacks in southern Israel, there was an outpouring of empathy from abroad. This sent an important message, both to victims' relatives and to the population as a whole, which is in a state of shock and fear. In Germany and at EU level, politicians of all persuasions have likewise pledged their support.

Amidst the expressions of sympathy and solidarity, however, there was also a more jarring note from some quarters, with various ministers from the German government demanding that financial support for the Palestinians be reviewed. Members of the opposition have even called for all payments to be stopped, even those that go via the United Nations or the Red Cross. The EU's Commissioner for Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi, an Orbán ally from Hungary, voiced similarly populist sentiments: on X (previously Twitter), he announced that the Commission would reassess its entire development portfolio and immediately cease all payments.

His statement, however, was quickly contradicted by the EU, which said humanitarian aid would not be affected. This matters because such aid is now more essential than ever, given the ongoing Israeli attacks on Gaza and the dramatic impact these are having on the civilian population. The territory's infrastructure, housing, energy supply and healthcare services have once again suffered severe damage, while hundreds of thousands have been internally displaced. Even before the current offensive, 80 per cent of Gaza residents were dependent on food aid. As understandable as the desire to take action when faced with an overwhelming sense of powerlessness is, aid spending should not be instrumentalised for symbolic political gestures; after all, the real-world consequences could be dire.

The announcement that the Commission was

So what kind of funding are we talking about here? The provision of funds for measures above and beyond humanitarian aid can be traced

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back to the 1990s peace process, in which the EU agreed to provide financial and institutional support to the newly created Palestinian Authority. When the Declaration of Principles was signed in 1993, the intention was to put an 'end to decades of confrontation and conflict' within the space of five years. There was, however, a lack of detail and binding commitments regarding how that would be achieved. Territory was to be gradually transferred to the Palestinians, but, after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in late 1995, this process was thrown off course as a declared opponent of the peace process – Benjamin Netanyahu – took the reins.

Since then, the German government and the EU have clung to the hope that the Palestinian Authority might still have the makings of a viable state. To date, they have thus invested several billion euros, primarily in the development of administrative and governmental structures. A large proportion of Germany's annual funding of around €340 million goes to the United Nations' refugee relief agency (UNRWA), which runs schools and healthcare facilities for Palestinian refugees, including in the Gaza Strip. This is augmented by a wide range of project-based support, in which funding is provided by organisations such as the *Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* ('German Development Cooperation', GIZ) or Germany's political foundations and delivered by what are, in many cases, very long-standing partners. Such funding benefits local communities and Palestinian civil society organisations from various fields, such as democracy support, human rights education, women's rights or art and culture.

The consequences of halting aid

For various reasons, calling this funding into question is not just wrong, it's downright dangerous and also counterproductive. For starters, the announcement that the Commission was 'putting its full development portfolio under review' to ensure that funds were not indirectly going to terrorists came as something of a surprise and raised the question: Was this then not previously guaranteed? In fact, German government and EU funding agreements have long contained what are known as 'terrorism clauses', and partners have to consent to these. Because EU and German government funding for the Palestinians has repeatedly been the subject of often polemical criticism and questioning, the organisations and individuals concerned are rigorously investigated before any support

is agreed upon — a procedure that has been regularly criticised by Palestinian organisations worried about their independence.

Given the current escalation, demands for a review or even a cessation of support could therefore hardly be more untimely.

In the current parliament alone, the German government has received 10 written enquiries from MPs on the subject of aid payments to Palestine. Rather than a lack of scrutiny, you could say that Palestinian organisations have in the past been subject to blanket suspicion, a case in point being the six Palestinian human rights organisations that the Israeli defence minister added to Israel's list of terrorist organisations in October 2021, without providing any substantive evidence for such a move. This listing had a massive impact on the work of the relevant organisations, who have since received no further funds from Germany. What's particularly concerning is that the affected groups, which include Palestinian human rights organisation *Al-Haq*, are not just key pillars of inner-Palestinian democracy but also long-standing critics of human rights abuses perpetrated by Hamas or the Palestinian Authority (PA).

If funding is not merely reviewed but actually suspended, this could have even more far-reaching consequences: were funders to withdraw support for the development of administrative and governmental structures, for the UNRWA and for its education and healthcare services, these much-beleaguered structures could collapse. Their financial situation was already shaky, in part because the right-wing Israeli government has repeatedly held back tax income owing to the PA and agitated against the UNRWA. Many Israeli politicians are well aware, however, just how dangerous the cessation of financial support for the PA could be. In the event of its collapse, sole responsibility for the territories would revert to Israel, which, as before 1993, would have to provide essential services to the Palestinians while maintaining an occupying force. The present security arrangements would also end — a nightmare scenario given current threat levels. This could result in a new uprising involving a further, unchecked escalation of violence, similar to that seen during the Second Intifada.

We need to use this moment of solidarity with

It is, though, also true to say that, given the two-state solution's failure, the EU needs to fundamentally question whether the Palestinian

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Authority is still a suitable partner for the achievement of its desired objective of peaceful conflict resolution; after all, the PA has long since lost credibility in the eyes of Palestinian society and, since 2006, is no longer legitimised via democratic elections. Any change of course would, however, have to be underpinned by a new overarching strategy that would also provide an alternative political framework. In that context, a ramping up of support for Palestinian civil society, the United Nations and essential humanitarian aid supplies would be all the more vital.

Given the current escalation, demands for a review or even a cessation of support could therefore hardly be more untimely. They are not only counterproductive, they also send a dangerous message. Doubtless they go down well with Netanyahu's hardline government, but it, too, is unable to answer the question of what should come after the siege of Gaza ordered by defence minister Yoav Gallant, and the large-scale destruction that this will likely wreak.

A Gaza Strip that remains indefinitely uninhabitable and destitute is unacceptable, as is the complete collapse of West Bank institutions. The upshot would be even more chaos and terror. We need to use this moment of solidarity with Israel to bolster those Palestinian actors who support peaceful coexistence based on respect for the rights of all the region's people.



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