FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 14.08.2025 | Sven Kühn von Burgsdorff

# The death of EU values in Gaza

## The time for hand-wringing and empty declarations is over. The EU has ample tools at its disposal to pressure Israel to end its brutal war in Gaza

The EU likes to think of itself as a normative power — a community of values, committed to upholding international law, promoting peace, protecting civilians and building a rules-based global order. These are not just lofty ideals; they are enshrined in EU treaties, declarations and Council conclusions. But when it comes to the brutal, drawn-out destruction of Gaza and the continued illegal occupation of Palestine, these principles seem to have become hollow rhetoric. Worse, they are being actively undermined by the craven inaction of the EU's institutions and the blockage of governments like Germany, Italy, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

The European Commission has been shamefully absent as well. Only as a result of recent pressure from many Member States did it propose the most tepid of measures by asking the Foreign Affairs Council to suspend access for Israeli SMEs that have applied for financial support under the dual-use technology EIC Accelerator window of Horizon Europe. Even this minor proposal of the Commission has so far been blocked by several EU countries, including Germany and Italy, thereby failing – again – to enforce the existing conditionality clauses of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, which require respect for human rights and international law.

While hundreds of thousands of Palestinian civilians are being killed, maimed, starved and displaced, the European Union dithers. The International Court of Justice has not only issued provisional measures towards Israel because of the plausible risk of genocide in Gaza – orders the Netanyahu government has flatly ignored – but also declared that Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory is unlawful and constitutes the crime of segregation or apartheid. The International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued arrest warrants for Prime Minister Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Gallant for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The UN, human rights organisations, as well as most former Israeli top military and intelligence officials, have sounded the alarm

about Israel's catastrophic actions in Gaza and its dehumanising policies in the West Bank.

The time for hand-wringing and empty declarations is over. The EU has ample tools at its disposal to pressure Israel to end its brutal war in Gaza, dismantle the occupation, and move towards a viable two-state solution, with an independent and democratic Palestinian state living side by side in peace with Israel.

## What individual states can do

If the European Union remains unable to muster the political will for collective action to apply EU-wide restrictive measures, such as suspending the Association Agreement, banning trade with Israel's illegal settlements, applying sanctions on government officials and military commanders, halting arms supplies or suspending Horizon Europe, then the moral, political and legal burden falls on individual Member States.

Countries like Spain, Ireland and Slovenia have already taken encouraging steps in recognising the State of Palestine and demanding accountability for Israeli crimes. But so much more is needed now. European countries that claim to support human rights and uphold international law must lead by example and start acting within their own prerogatives. This can include actions such as unilaterally suspending or revoking arms export licenses to Israel under their own national export control laws, including for dual-use equipment and technology.

Secondly, with respect to Horizon Europe, any Member State can stop funding national co-financed projects involving Israeli entities or withdraw from joint research agreements with Israeli institutions. Universities and research bodies can also be directed not to cooperate with certain Israeli institutions.

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Moreover, Member States can impose their own national sanctions regimes on human rights grounds, including visa bans and asset freezes. While the UK and some Nordic countries have such laws, others could use anti-money laundering or counterterrorism laws to freeze assets. States can also deny entry to individuals under national immigration law, as done by France and Slovenia.

While a comprehensive trade ban on settlements falls under exclusive EU competence, Member States can exclude settlement-linked companies

from public procurement and state investment funds. State-owned enterprises or sovereign wealth funds can divest from settlement-linked companies, as done by Norway. Furthermore, national authorities can ban port calls or airspace use for Israeli military vessels and aircraft.

Lastly, Member States with universal jurisdiction provisions (such as Germany, Spain, Belgium, France and Sweden) can prosecute suspected Israeli and Palestinian war criminals if they enter their territory, or in some cases even in absentia. The Baltic countries and the Czech Republic can apply sanctions for human rights violations even outside the EU's global human rights framework. All Member States are, of course, obliged to support the ICC in arrest warrants and investigations.

In the absence of a collective EU response, individual countries should establish coalitions of the willing that take matters into their own hands. This would not only neutralise European spoilers but also create a critical mass of support within the EU and beyond, including in the Arab world and wider Global South, in the pursuit of protecting and enforcing international law.

## Undermining European unity and standing

And yet, the EU itself remains frozen — paralysed by the political obstruction of a few Member States and an indefensible unwillingness to confront Israel's government with meaningful consequences. This failure to act is not only a betrayal of the Palestinian people. It is a direct threat to Europe's own credibility and standing in the world. How can the EU expect to be taken seriously when it demands accountability for Russian war crimes in Ukraine, while shielding Israel from any form of sanction, scrutiny or effective pressure?

This hypocrisy is not lost on the international community — particularly the Global South, where memories of colonialism and double standards run deep. African, Latin American and Arab leaders see the EU's selective outrage for what it is: a continuation of Eurocentric foreign policy that privileges geopolitical allies and punishes adversaries, regardless of the principles at stake.

Europe's image as a principled, reliable and rules-based actor is being destroyed, not by autocratic Russia and China, or other adversaries with dictatorial regimes, but by its own refusal to enforce international law when the perpetrator is an ally.

*Both Ideserve leaders – and international partners – who spare no effort to work towards justice and peace, not perpetual domination and a never-ending cycle of violence.*

At the heart of this disgraceful paralysis are governments that have chosen to side with impunity. While Germany undoubtedly has a historical responsibility to protect Jewish life and the security of the Jewish people, this in no way justifies placing the actions of the Israeli government above international law. Under the highly problematic political premise of unconditional support for Israel as part of Germany's 'Staatsräson', Berlin has become the Israeli government's chief enabler in Europe, delivering weapons, blocking EU measures and silencing domestic dissent. It was only thanks to growing public pressure – two-thirds of Germans want their government to take effective measures against Israel – that on 8 August, Chancellor Merz announced the unprecedented step of temporarily stopping the supply of weapons that the IDF can use in Gaza. However, he later underlined that Germany would not support commercial sanctions against Israel.

If the German government were truly serious about securing Israel's future and preventing another 7 October from happening, it would have to work tirelessly to end the illegal occupation of Palestine and the ongoing genocidal military campaign in Gaza. Berlin could even help rescue the remaining Israeli hostages from their terrible fate by pressuring Netanyahu to resume meaningful negotiations with Hamas towards hostage release, ceasefire and massive entry of humanitarian aid — negotiations that the Israeli Prime Minister abandoned in March only to salvage his own political survival when threatened by the openly racist far-right parties of his coalition.

Germany is unfortunately not alone in its embarrassing lack of engagement and action among EU Member States. Under Meloni's far-right government, Italy has become an echo chamber for the Israeli war narrative. And Hungary and the Czech Republic, for far too long loyal to nationalist authoritarianism, have consistently obstructed EU consensus on Palestine.



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