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The EU can pressure Netanyahu

— so why won't it?

On 18 March, Benjamin Netanyahu broke a truce established in Gaza days before Donald Trump's inauguration. Within hours, bombings had killed more than 400 people. He was thus ensuring his political survival; continuing the war was the condition Bezalel Smotrich, his far-right partner, set for not overthrowing the government coalition.

Since then, thousands more Palestinian civilians, predominantly women and children, have been killed, and the lives of the surviving hostages have been put in peril. A total blockade and widespread famine have catastrophically worsened an already dire humanitarian situation. Most buildings and infrastructure have been destroyed. The last water desalination plant is no longer operational.

The assessment is universally grim. The United Nations has warned that the situation in Gaza has deteriorated to its worst point since the start of the war. The aid organisation Médecins Sans Frontières has described Gaza as a mass grave for thousands of Gazans but 'also for those trying to help them'. Twelve of the largest international aid organisations have just launched a joint, desperate appeal. Yet, the pleas seem to go unanswered. Israel's Defence Minister Israel Katz has reiterated in recent days that 'no humanitarian aid will enter Gaza'.

Meanwhile, Smotrich echoed this sentiment, confirming that maximum pressure was being exerted to 'evacuate people to the south and implement President Trump's voluntary migration plan for the inhabitants of Gaza'. This plan, Katz had already presented to the EU Council in early 2024 when he was foreign minister. The Israeli army has seized half of the territory and placed two-thirds of Gaza under evacuation orders, effectively designating them as 'no-go zones', including the border town of Rafah.

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The aim, it appears, is to create the conditions for what would be the largest ethnic cleansing operation since the end of the Second World War. To claim that 'not a single grain of wheat

> will enter Gaza' is a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law. It is impossible not to see this as an intent to exterminate, which the International Criminal Court had already taken into consideration when issuing arrest warrants against Netanyahu and his former defence minister. It is no less serious than that found in the past by international justice in Srebrenica and Rwanda.

Simultaneously, in the West Bank, the army is conducting its largest offensive in decades. More than 40 000 Palestinians have already been forcibly displaced from the north of the territory, in apparent preparation for plans pushed by far-right lawmakers to expand new settlements, which are illegal under international law. On 23 March, the government nevertheless granted legitimacy to 13 of these settlements. The fundamentalist far right hopes that Donald Trump will support its plans to annex part or all of the West Bank, a move that would effectively extinguish any remaining possibility of creating a Palestinian state.

In much of Europe, attention has recently been focused primarily on the customs duties Trump is threatening. Talk of Gaza had largely faded. But a photograph of a Gazan child who had both arms amputated, which won an international award, and the death of photographer Fatima Hassouna, the central figure in a film selected for the upcoming Cannes Film Festival, have rekindled emotions. The scarcity of unfiltered images from Gaza in public discourse, some argue, contributes to a collective turning away: 'Out of sight, out of mind'.

Yet, the grim reality is that it is not merely one child, or a hundred, or even a thousand, but thousands of children who have died or been maimed in Gaza. And the conditions are harrowing. Gaza has become a war primarily against children. While a photograph of one child can bring many to tears, the overall scale of the tragedy often seems too vast to fully grasp or respond to. Meanwhile, Netanyahu is being received with honours in Washington and Budapest, contrasting sharply with the International Criminal Court's move to seek arrest warrants against him.

EU action is long overdue

Despite numerous resolutions adopted by the United Nations and decisions by the International Criminal Court, during my tenure as High Representative of the Union, I found it impossible to compel the EU Council and Commission to act in response to the massive and repeated violations of international and humanitarian law by Netanyahu's

government — in stark contrast to the bloc's robust response to Vladimir Putin's aggression against Ukraine.

Throughout my term, I observed how significantly this double standard weakened the EU's standing globally, not only in the Muslim world but also across Africa, Latin America and Asia. Spain and a few other European nations have voiced concerns, asking the Commission to examine whether Israel's conduct aligns with its obligations under its association agreement with the EU. Their calls, however, have reportedly been met largely with silence.

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For some European countries, historical guilt over the Holocaust has arguably been transformed into a 'reason of state' that justifies unconditional support for Israel, risking engaging the EU in complicity with crimes against humanity. One horror cannot justify another. Unless the values the EU claims to uphold are to lose all credibility, the bloc cannot continue to passively observe the unfolding horror in Gaza and the 'Gazaification' of the West Bank.

Contrary to common perception, and despite the apparent lack of empathy shown by some of its leaders, the EU holds significant leverage over the Israeli government. It is Israel's leading partner in terms of trade, investment and people-to-people exchanges. The EU supplies at least a third of Israel's arms imports and has concluded its most comprehensive association agreement with the country, which is, like all such agreements, conditional on respect for international law, particularly humanitarian law.

If the political will exists, the EU possesses the means to act. And the time for EU action is long overdue. Many Israelis, aware that Benjamin Netanyahu's current trajectory ultimately threatens Israel's own security and survival, would likely welcome such action.

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