

**The EU, Operation Guardian of the Walls, and the Day After**

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The escalation between Israel and Hamas elicited responses in the form of statements from some EU members. The common denominator of the rhetoric included condemnation of Hamas for the rocket fire at Israeli civilians, support of Israel's right to self-defense, and a call for an end to hostilities. Separate statements by various countries noted additional points, some of which emphasized the importance of renewing the Israeli-Palestinian political process. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell presented a situation assessment that emphasized the need to address the fundamental problems of the conflict according to agreed international parameters toward a two-state solution, with capitals of both states in Jerusalem. Many other EU members share his view. This perspective contravenes Israel's official position, and thus familiar disagreements between Israel and the EU will likely remain and might even be exacerbated. Yet while recent events underscored the EU's irrelevance during a crisis in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, the EU has not abandoned its drive to influence developments, especially in the context of efforts to renew a political process.

The recent Hamas attacks, as well as Israel's military response to the rocket barrages and the violent incidents in the mixed Jewish and Arab cities in Israel and the West Bank, led, as expected, to responses in the form of official statements by some EU members. The common denominator of the rhetoric included condemnation of Hamas for the rocket fire at Israeli civilians, support of Israel's right to self-defense, and a call for an end to hostilities. Individual statements made by various countries highlighted additional points, some of which emphasized the need to renew the Israeli-Palestinian political process.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas noted the need to address the reasons behind the crisis. He said that after achieving quiet, the dialogue with Israel and the Palestinian Authority should be resumed. Maas added that the EU will have a political and humanitarian role to play, and expressed support for the Quartet's activities. Asked why it is not possible to talk to Hamas, along the lines of talks with the Taliban, German Chancellor Angela Merkel clarified the need for indirect contact with the organization (through Egypt and other countries that are in contact with it), essential to any efforts to

reach a ceasefire. The Chancellor expressed solidarity with Israel and repeated her determination to act against demonstrations of hatred of Israel and antisemitism. She emphasized the imperative to distinguish between criticism of Israel and antisemitism.

Regarding Israel's military response to Hamas rocket fire, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian raised the issue of proportionality and the need to act in accordance with international law. In connection with the demolition of the high-rise building in Gaza, which housed the offices of the AP news agency, he stressed – albeit without directly criticizing Israel – the need to protect the security of journalists. Regarding the tension in Jerusalem between Muslims and Jews and Israel's security forces, Le Darian called for maintaining the status quo in the holy places. He also reiterated France's opposition to Israel's settlement policy in the West Bank and the intention to evict Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah. During a Security Council discussion on the escalation in the Gaza arena, the French ambassador to the UN blamed the round of violence between Israel and Hamas on the absence of a political perspective, adding that violence would continue if there was no progress toward establishing two states based on the 1967 border, with Jerusalem as the capital of both states. He called for the resumption of the peace process and expressed concern at the "clashes between Jews and Arabs in East Jerusalem and in Israel."

In her remarks at the Security Council, British Ambassador to the UN Barbara Woodward likewise stressed the need for proportionality in Israel's response to Hamas's fire. Specifically, she opposed the demolition of houses and the evacuation of Palestinians from their homes. She reiterated that the settlements are an obstacle to peace and called on Israel to stop expanding them. In addition, she repeated Britain's commitment to a two-state solution.

An attempt to formulate a unified opinion of all EU member states failed due to Hungarian opposition. Therefore, EU High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell was forced to settle for an informal statement given during the fighting on behalf of twenty-six members. The announcement emphasized the need to address the fundamental problems of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to find a path that will allow a return to negotiations on a two-state solution.

In a blog posted on the EU's official website, Borrell detailed his thoughts on the current round of escalation and the way forward. His remarks are a framework for him and many EU partners in their future efforts to advance a two-state solution: following the implementation of a ceasefire, its stabilization, and the provision of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be addressed through political means, as the status quo is intolerable. Rather than crisis management, there must be efforts to

solve the underlying problems. Borrell ascribed the escalation to the absence of progress toward the realization of the two-state solution. He said that the relative calm that prevailed in the arena after the confrontation between Israel and Hamas in 2014, as well as the normalization agreements between Israel and the Gulf states, created a sense among Israelis that the Palestinian problem was solved and that the status quo could last forever. Recent developments, including events within Israel, have proved the opposite, i.e., the fundamental problems have not yet been resolved. A ceasefire may rekindle the sense that there is no need to engage in the roots of the conflict, which will eventually lead to another round of violence. Therefore, every effort must be made to renew meaningful political negotiations for a two-state solution, based on agreed international parameters and carried out in small steps, including elections to the Palestinian Authority and a mutually acceptable way to end the isolation of the Gaza Strip.

Even though similar statements were made on numerous occasions in the past, the EU has to reengage in a concrete manner in an attempt to revive the political process. Specifically regarding the Gaza Strip, Borrell said the EU could not be expected to once again fund the reconstruction of Gaza without a significant chance of solving the underlying problems. He said though there are enough reasons to doubt that this time the results of the Union's involvement would be different, it must try again. Borrell noted the 30th anniversary of the Madrid process and the need for re-internationalization of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, stressing that he intends to make every effort to renew negotiation and build trust. To this end, he is in contact with all parties involved – Palestinians, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the United States – and is working to revive the Quartet. Borrell also stressed the need to formulate as much unity as possible between EU members.

The EU's ability to advance its policies is inextricably tied to coordination with the United States. In a conversation between Borrell and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during the fighting, Blinken stressed the partnership between the EU and the US, which he said plays a crucial role in the Middle East. Blinken will presumably update Borrell and other EU colleagues on his talks with the parties during his Middle East visit and especially on the next steps in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is too early to assess whether a European-American joint work plan will be agreed upon. Based on statements by President Biden and by Blinken himself, it seems that the administration is not expected to deal with the basic problems that Borrell addressed with a sober view of the situation in Israel and among the Palestinians – at least not in the near future.

The analysis of the situation presented by Borrell, which is shared by many EU members, contravenes Israel's official position, let alone the operative implications of the analysis, i.e., the need to address the conflict in accordance with known parameters. Moreover,

calls by the EU to resume the activities of the Quartet and to internationalize the conflict will undoubtedly be rejected by Israel.

In conclusion, the crisis between Israel and Hamas highlights once again the large divide in the situation assessment of a significant number of EU countries compared to that of Israel regarding what sparked it and what must occur to prevent repeated rounds of violence. Despite its failures so far to help the parties move toward a two-state solution, and despite frustration that its support in the reconstruction of the Strip (as well as assistance given to the Palestinian Authority) not only did not bear fruit, but was largely wasted, the EU – if it succeeds in reaching any agreement among its partners, which is not guaranteed – will again try to contribute its share to the effort to take advantage of the recent crisis to advance a solution to the conflict. It is possible that subsequent to Secretary Blinken's statement on the partnership between the US and the EU in the Middle East, an effort will be made to coordinate positions and perhaps even implement a division of labor between them. Therefore, and assuming that the Union will be able to reach a consensus within its ranks, the Israeli government should engage in dialogue with EU members as well as with its institutions – the European Council, the European Commission, and the European Parliament – to present a strategy for dealing with the Gaza Strip, and later on, for the political process with the Palestinians, as well as its vision of the EU's role in this process.