The Evolution of the European Union Policies towards Israeli- Palestine Conflict: The Interplay of Regional and International Parameters

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ABSTRACT

During the 1980s, the European Community (EC) adopted a "balanced" approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the 2000s, however, the EU changed its policy of neutrality. It began to address Palestinian issue within the framework of security and emphasized more and more terror dimension of the conflict. On this basis, this study aims to explore the reasons behind the changing policies of the European Union toward Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By analysing the shifts in the international and regional setting, the paper explores the securitization of the EU's Palestinian policy since early 2000s. The findings suggest that the differing interest of member states, the failure of the EU's liberal regional approach in the Middle East, and the changing geostrategic setting are the key factors driving the EU's evolving policies on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Keywords: European Union, Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Middle East Peace Process, Common Foreign Security Policy, Neighbourhood Policy.

AB'nin İsrail-Filistin Çatışmasına Yönelik Değişen Politikaları: Bölgesel ve Uluslararası Parametrelerin Etkileşimi

ÖZ

Avrupa Topluluğu 1980'li yılların başından itibaren Filistin meselesine karşı "dengeli ve normatif" bir yaklaşım sergilemiştir. Ancak 2000'li yılların başından itibaren Avrupa Birliği'nin Filistin sorununa yönelik yaklaşımı değişmeye başlamıştır. AB Filistin sorununu daha çok güvenlik bağlamında ele almıştır. Bu çalışma uluslararası ve bölgesel ortamdaki değişimlere atıfta bulunarak, Avrupa Birliği'nin İsrail-Filistin sorununa yönelik değişen politikalarının ardındaki nedenleri araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Makale üç bölümden oluşmaktadır. İlk bölümde AB'nin İsrail-Filistin çatışmasına yaklaşımının tarihsel arka planı ele alınacaktır. İkinci bölümde, 2000 yılların başlarından itibaren AB'nin hem söylem hem de politika düzeyinde Filistin soruna nasıl yaklaştığı tartışılacaktır. Üçüncü bölümde, AB'nin değişen politikalarını etkileyen küresel, kurumsal ve bölgesel parametreler ele alınacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Avrupa Birliği, İsrail-Filistin Çatışması, Orta Doğu Barış Süreci, Ortak Dış ve Güvenlik Politikası, Avrupa Komşuluk Politikası.

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INTRODUCTION

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has taken an important place in the foreign policy of the EU. The European Community (EC)[1] had addressed Israeli-Palestinian conflict even before the EU formulated its Common Foreign and Security Policy in 1992. By adopting the Venice Declaration in 1980, the EC recognized both Israel's right to live in safety and collective rights of the Palestinian people. Thus, member states adopted a "balanced" or neutral position toward the actors of the dispute.

On this basis, the EU supported the resolution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict based on "two-state solution" as "the only viable solution to bring peace to the region." To achieve this goal, the EU used soft power instruments such as negotiation, diplomacy, and humanitarian assistance. Unlike the United States, the EU's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict resulted from its commitment to defending universal principles and values rather than its military might.

However, the EU's normative position on the Palestinian conflict has changed gradually since the early 2000s. Following Hamas's recent attacks on Israeli towns on 7 October 2023, the European Council condemned Hamas's "brutal and indiscriminate terrorist attacks" and asserted Israel's right to self-defense. The president of European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen expressed that "the barbaric terrorists of Hamas fighting against Israel had murdered over 1300 human beings. They aim to eradicate Jewish life from the land." For this reason, she said, "Europe stands with Israel and Israel has the right to defend itself." Such a discourse clearly indicates that the EU has moved from its "balanced" and "right-based" stance to a more a more "security-oriented position." While two-state solution is still the EU's mainstream approach, the EU's discourse and practice appeared to resemble that of Israel and the United States.

On this basis, this study aims to examine main factors affecting the EU's policies and discourses on the Palestinian issue from the early 2000s to 2023. The main research question of the article is: "What are the factors that caused the EU to change its policies? The paper

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[1]The European Communities (EC) was three international entities, including the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC or Euratom), and the European Economic Community (EEC). The European Communities were included as the first pillar of the European Union in 1993 by the Maastricht Treaty establishing the European Union. In this paper, the abbreviation of the EC is used for the actions of the Community before the 1992. The abbreviation of the EU was used for the actions after 1992.

will refer to the changing geopolitical setting, the failure of the EU's liberal regional paradigm in the Middle East, and diverging interest of the member states as parameters explaining policy change with regard to Palestinian conflict.

In this context, the study consists of three parts. In the first part, historical overview of the EC/EU's policy with regard to Palestine-Israel conflict will be presented. In the second part, policy shifts that took place in the 2000s will be determined. In the last part, how variables such as the end of the liberal regional integration paradigm, shifting geostrategic context, and diverging interest of the member states have an impact on changing policies of the EU will be discussed.

A Historical Overview of the EU's Policies Regarding the Palestinian Conflict

In the period from the establishment of the EC in 1957 to the Six Day War in 1963, the EC totally disregarded political aspects of the Palestinian issue. Indeed, the six founding European states signed the Treaty of Rome (Bhader 2014: 337) a year after the Suez War and during the Algerian War of Independence in 1957. In such a geopolitical context, member states regarded Israel not only as an "ally," but also a "partner" of the EC. Therefore, they demonstrated strong solidarity with and support for the claims of Israel. For example, the EC signed its first economic agreement with Israel in 1967 (Bhader 2014: 337). Germany granted considerable financial assistance to Israel (Bhader 2014: 337). France provided Israel with nuclear technology and military assistance. Different from its position to Israel, however, the EC totally ignored the claims of the Palestinian people. It either positioned the Palestinian issue as a secondary priority or viewed it as a humanitarian concern that the United Nations should address.

In this period, the EC member states did not have a common position on the Palestine issue. This situation became evident in the Six Day War in 1967 (Bicci &Voltolini 2022: 311). Six member states had different views and national interests on the Arab-Israel conflict. During the war, some member states such as Germany and Netherlands sided with Israel, whereas others, including France under General de Gaulle, opted to enforce an arms embargo on all involved parties, including Israel. The war clearly displayed the failure of the EC to coordinate foreign policy of its member states.

Despite the lack of common position among member states, the Six Day War in 1963 led the EC to take important initiatives in the following years (Bicci &Voltolini 2022: 311).

The fact that the EC member states could not produce a common position provided a stimulus for the establishment of the European Political Cooperation (EPC) in 1970. The EPC was a forum for coordinating foreign policy of the member states at the intergovernmental level (Stein 1983: 49; Pardo & Peters 2012: 6) In its first meeting, the EPC addressed Palestinian issue and discussed the development of a common position in a way supporting Palestinian claims.

Indeed, the EC attempted to develop, coherent and normative position regarding the Arab-Israeli dispute during the period of 1967 to 1980. The EC formulated its first concrete strategy in response to the Yom Kippur War or October War in 1973. In this war, the Arab coalition launched an attack on Israel during the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur. Initially, the member states could not formulate a common position in response to the war. Their position changed when Arab members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) imposed an oil embargo on Western countries supporting Israeli on 17 October 1973.

The OPEC oil embargo was a turning point for the EC. It increased oil prices and inflation in the developed countries of the West. As a result of the embargo, the EC member states realized the extent of their dependence on energy supplies and their vulnerability to the events occurring in the Middle East. That awareness rendered the EC to develop a coherent and balanced Middle East policy in a way guaranteeing energy security.

As a result, the EC issued its first declaration on 6 November 1973 in Brussels. Brussels Declaration called for the parties to resolve the dispute on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 242. It set four principles forming the basis of Middle East Peace Process. These principles are a) prohibiting the use of force to seize territory, b) urging Israel to end its post-Six-Day War territorial occupation, c) recognizing the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of all states in the region, as well as their right to live in peace within secure and recognized borders, and d) recognizing "legitimate rights" of Palestinians.

In addition, the EU formulated Euro-Arab Dialogue (EAD) in response to OPEC oil crisis. Its aim is to foster Euro-Arab relations by establishing and strengthening economic and cultural ties both at bilateral and international levels (Miller 2014: 493). The Kissinger administration criticized the Euro-Arab Dialogue for being pro-Arab side and undermining the US influence in the Middle East.

The EC also adopted Venice Declaration when the Camp David Process faced challenges regarding the Palestinian self-government in 1980. (Pardo & Peters 2012: 6). Venice Declartion set the principles that define the Community's perspective on the resolution of the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It recognized the Palestinian right to self-determination and all nations, including Israel, to live in peace within safe and recognized boundaries. It gave equal value to Palestinians and Israeli claims. The declaration also legitimized the role of the PLO in the negotiation process and its quest for self-determination. By adopting such a declaration, the EC became the primary supporter of a two-state solution. Even though Israel and the United States largely ignored the Venice Declaration, the fundamental ideas outlined in the Venice Declaration set the principles of Oslo Accords, which the Israeli Government and the PLO signed in Washington in 1993.

In the 1990s, the European Union (EU) focused primarily on the economic and financial aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this decade, the EU utilized the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), known as the Barcelona process, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). It concluded association agreements with Israel and the PLO under the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Moreover, the EU participated in the Regional Economic Development Working Group (REDWG) during the peace process.

The EU intended to create an area of peace and prosperity in the Middle East. It expected that cooperation in the field of trade and economy, in which all the conflicting parties participate, would spill over to the peace- building efforts at the political level. The EU took the advantage of these tools as a regional dialogue platform that united all parties to the conflict. Accordingly the EU demonstrated its commitment to a "balanced approach" without favoring either Israel or the Arab nations (Hollis 2020: 31).

Changing Policies of the EU in the 2000's

The onset of the second intifada undermined above-mentioned settlement strategy of the EU in the early 2000.[2] But the real blow came with the subsequent events. Al-Qaeda attacks on September 11, 2001, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the terror attacks in Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005, the rise of Hamas in 2006, and eventually the Arab uprising in 2011 were critical junctures for the EU. In response to all these developments, the EU adopted more and

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[2] Second intifada was one of the most important uprisings carried out by Palestinians against Israeli occupation in the early 2000s. The collapse of the Camp David Summit, which anticipated the establishment of a final agreement the Middle East peace process in July 2000, was the root cause of the unrest.

more "war on terrorism" rhetoric and addressed Palestinian issue within the context of security and stability.

In the early 2000s, Palestinian radical groups increased terror activities targeting Israelis, while Israel carried out massive and violent military operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. On the ground, Israel took control over several regions that were formerly under the authority of the Palestinian Authority, including significant parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The EU, as it did in the past, criticized Israel's overreliance on excessive and disproportionate use of military instruments, extrajudicial killings, illegal penetration into Palestinian territories, and expanding settlements (Peter 2020: 100-101). But this time, the EU made harsh criticism and condemnation of the Palestinian side for using terrorist tactics. It also denounced Palestinian terrorism in the Seville Declaration of June 2022. It also emphasized that terrorist acts cannot bring an end to the peace process and regional stability. The EU also mentioned that the fight against all forms of terrorism as paramount importance in the pursuit of "a just and comprehensive peace" in the Middle East. These discourses marked a significant shift in the EU's position, as the EU hasn't criticized any Palestinian attacks against Israel occupation since the early 1970s (Peter 2020: 110).

When Hamas won the elections in 2006 and took control over the Palestinian liberalization movement, this rhetoric intensified. After the election of Hamas, the EU declared that it would not cooperate with Hamas unless Hamas fulfilled three conditions (Filiu 2014: 302). These conditions are renouncing violence, acknowledging the existence of Israel, and adopting past agreements and obligations (Mellen & Chen 2023: 26). When Hamas refused to recognize the conditions, the EU included Hamas into its terror list.

Following recent Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, the European Council condemned Hamas attacks in the harshest possible terms. Having declared, "there is no justification for terror," the member states recognized Israel's right to self-defense in accordance with humanitarian and international law." In the mean time, however, the EU failed to see human rights violations and war crimes committed by the state of Israel in Palestine. This position undermined the EU's already weak actorness in the Middle East peace process.

Factors underlying changing policies of the EU

There are several reasons why the EU's stance on the Palestinian issue has shifted dramatically in recent years. Three variables influence the EU's policy, regarding the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict. These are the divergent interests among member states, changing geopolitical context and the collapse of the liberal-functional regional paradigm following the Arab uprising.

Incoherence and Different Interests of The Member States

The EU had a minor impact on the settlement of the Palestine-Israeli dispute, despite its being main financer of the Palestinian Authority. During the Cold War, the United States took a dominant position and aligned itself with Israel, while the Soviet Union supported the Palestinian cause. The bipolar order constrained the actorness of the EU in the Middle East. Notwithstanding political limitations imposed by the international framework, the EU member states could display a common position with regards to Palestinian issue. They supported Middle East peace process, provided humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people, and opposed the colonization of occupied territories by Israel. Indeed, it had been relatively easy to reach consensus on these issues within nine-member state European Union. As the EU expanded to include Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) in 2004, and the Palestine-Israeli conflict turned into a complex phenomenon affecting the member states national interests, it became increasingly difficult for the member states to develop a unified policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

According to Akgül-Açıkçeşme and Özel (2024), intra-EU contestation is one of the reasons why the EU could not reach common position at the EU level. Intra-EU contestation is the opposition of member states on "fundamental norms or long-standing positions and established practices of the EU for reasons of domestic expediency." According to Lovato (2024), various internal and external actors create divisions within the EU-27. For example, populist and mainstream parties, seeking political advantages, can actively contest or withdraw from previously determined policy position or norms at the EU level. Moreover, the differences in policies, interests, and norms can intensify intra-EU contestation.

Indeed, the politicization of the Israel-Palestine conflict gave rise to divergent policies and interests among member states. The member states could not reach collective decision both at the EU and the UN levels. For example, the member states could not develop common position on the UN resolution with regards to Israeli attacks on Gaza in 2008–2009, on Palestine's membership to UNESCO in 2011, and on granting observer status to Palestine in the UN in 2012.

As Akgül-Açıkçeşme and Özel (2024) mention, the EU member states can be categorized into three main groups based on their stance on the conflict. The first group, Belgium, Sweden, Luxembourg, and Ireland, generally emphasize the dimensions of human rights and international law. They are the main supporters of the Palestinian claims. The second group, including Denmark, Sweden, France, Germany, and Spain, attempts to maintain balanced approach and positive relations with Israelis. The third group, including Austria, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, supports the state of Israel. The countries in these three categories may have divergent interests in terms of economic and trade relations, energy security, and military cooperation. They generally reflect their different national interests to the EU level. Their position may challenge the established practices and common position of the member states on Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Israeli government can also take the advantage of different positions of member states and their discontent from the EU. By forming alliances with discontent member states, Israel can fragment the Union and reduce the influence of the EU member states opposing the occupation (Asseburg 2021: 101-102). Indeed, intra EU-contestation has hindered the EU's ability to implement proactive initiatives. Since June 2016, the EU Council has refrained from adopting resolutions on the conflict, and member states have not voted collectively in the UN General Assembly.

Geopolitical Shifts and Energy Security

Historically, oil has played a very significant role in the external relations of the European Union. Unlike the United States, which has its own oil resources and thus maintains a certain degree of autonomy from external energy sources, Europe has consistently relied on energy resources of the Middle East due to the lack of oil reserves in the continent.

As such, there is a strong connection in between the EU's Palestinian policy and energy security. Firstly, instability in Palestine can have a negative impact for the EU in terms of critical transmission lines such as Suez, Hormuz, and Bab el Mendeb. Secondly, Palestinian conflict can jeopardize European energy security. The EC learned from OPEC crisis that Arab countries could use oil as a leverage instrument in the Arab-Israeli conflict. A decrease in oil supplies would lead to rising prices, inflationary pressures, increased unemployment, and a potential economic recession across the continent. (Yergin 2003: 578; Sevim 2012: 374).

As such, the EU member states attempt to ensure energy security through its normative power in the Middle East Peace Process (Yergin 2003: 588). By criticizing Israel's assertive

strategies and defending the Palestinians claims, the EU sought to appease anti-Western Arab regimes and their public opinion. Such a right-based discourse and Arab-sided policies legitimized the EU in the Middle East. In this way, the EU reduced the risks with regards to European energy security. However, this geopolitical context has fundamentally changed since the beginning of the 2000s.

There are three major developments that have triggered this transformation. First of all, North America has emerged as a major energy producer. (Van de Graaf, 2022: 439-41). European countries have found the opportunity of reducing their reliance on the energy resources from the Middle East, as they can now obtain energy resources from North America. Moreover, the center of global energy geopolitics has also shifted from the Middle East to the Atlantic Ocean. The EU member states become less concerned about areas like Suez, Babel-Mendeb, and Hormuz, which have historically been crucial for Europe's energy security and geopolitical stability (Kim 2022: 415-24).

Secondly, Putin's Russia has taken the advantage of its energy resources for achieving its political goals (Sakwa 2023: 133) during the Russian-Ukrainian war. In response to this Russian policy, European countries, which received about half of their energy from Russia, has turned to alternative renewable energy resources. Thereby, they attempted to reduce their dependence on Russian energy resources (Van de Graaf 2022: 441).

Thirdly, there has been a decline in the usage of fossil fuel in Europe. This situation is attributed to global warming and imbalances in supply and demand in the international energy markets. European countries are increasingly investing in environmentally friendly energy sources to decrease carbon footprints. By 2050, European nations will have decreased their reliance on traditional fossil fuels by lowering their carbon footprint (Tsiropoulos et al. 2020). The automotive sector has also experienced a rising demand for electric vehicles in recent years. This gave rise to the decreasing demand to the Middle East oil, since the transportation sector accounts for the largest portion of oil consumption (Andrews-Speed 2022: 401), Shortly, all these developments rendered the Palestine issue no longer a priority for the EU.

The Failure of Liberal Regional Integration Model

The EU's peace-building strategy centers on a liberal democratic model. The EU implements this model through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), known as the Barcelona process, and the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). These initiatives center on the idea that

peace and stability depend on the democratization of the Middle Eastern countries. The EU considered that it could contribute to the construction of a democratic state in Palestine by providing economic and financial aid to Palestine.

In this framework, regional instruments of the EU generally address political and economic reforms, focusing on bilateral agreements that facilitate the democratic process. Additionally, they include various financial mechanisms and incentive schemes to promote political change in Middle Eastern countries. For example, the MEDA program has supported the Barcelona Process with an economic mechanism that provides funding to civil society groups and state authorities supporting democratic and liberal change. To promote democratic change, the EU has implemented a system of negative conditionality in its bilateral agreements within this program. The mechanism of conditionality involves the threat of suspending funding, if there is a failure to comply with the EU's norms and principles.

Based on the underlying logic of these regional instruments, the EU supported the liberal state building of the Palestinian Authority. It has been leading provider of financial assistance to the key sectors, including infrastructure development, institution building, and economic sector. The EU considered the revival of the peace process contingent upon creating a viable Palestinian state characterized by democratic governance, a lack of corruption, and a stable economy. To do this, the European Union took the advantage of conditionality and various methods of financial and economic coercion.

However, the Union's efforts to promote the establishment of liberal and democratic Palestinian states economic and financial support encountered a challenge when Hamas was elected in 2006. Hamas, characterized by a strong Islamist identity, has gained significant power in the Palestinian administration through electoral processes. As such, it has complied with the procedural principles of democratic and liberal state. However, Islamic identity of Hamas was in conflict with the EU's vision of liberal-democratic state building in Palestine. The EU faced with a dilemma. The political and financial empowerment of Hamas would not guarantee the establishment of a democratic and liberal state in Palestine. However, not recognizing Hamas as a political actor in the Middle East would be contrary to the democratic principles and values adopted by the EU.

On this framework, the EU, along with other members of the Middle East Quartet, made the recognition of Hamas as a legitimate actor conditional upon to the fulfillment of certain political conditions. These conditions were the recognition of Israel, adherence to signed

agreements and obligations, acceptance of the roadmap of Middle East process, and the renunciation of violence and terrorism (Ziadeh 2007). After Hamas rejected these terms, the EU labeled Hamas an illegitimate political entity and placed it on the terrorist list.

Arab uprising that broke out in 2011 was another setback in the EU's democratic state building and regional integration efforts. It has introduced new dynamics into the interactions between the East and the West (Ziadeh 2017). Following Arab uprising, Islamic radical organizations have gained considerable influence in the Middle East policy. They started to form alliances with Islamic groups in different countries of the Middle East (Ziadeh 2017). This situation presented an important challenge for the EU's democracy promotion policies. The political actors coming to power through democratic process in the Middle East might be anti-Western and autocratic. The EU could not cooperate with these actors due to the ideational differences.

CONCLUSION

The EU's contributed to the economic growth and institution building in Palestine. Compared to other actors including Russia and the US, the EU has struggled to maintain a balanced and normative policy in the Middle East. The EU also legitimized Palestinian resistance movement and the claims of the Palestinian people in the world. However, the EU has changed its "balanced approach" and normative position since the beginning of 2000s. It framed the Palestinian-Israeli conflict within the context of security and terrorism.

Various parameters have influenced evolving policies of the EU. The global and regional context has provided the EU with certain constraints and opportunities. The changing geostrategic context has resulted in a positive environment for the EU in terms of energy security. The EU is now less dependent on the energy resources of the Middle East. This development, along with the enlargement of the CEEC, led to the breakdown of the common position on "two-state solution" at the EU level. Member states began to develop bilateral relations with Israel in line with their respective interests.

The rise of new actors such as Hamas and the eruption of Arab uprising in 2011 posed another challenge to the EU's regional integration model and liberal state-building paradigm as well. The EU's instruments failed to bring democratic governance in the Middle Eastern countries, including Palestine.

Moreover, ideational differences have also played an important role in the evolving policies of the EU. The EU did not recognize Hamas as a democratically elected entity because of its Islamic identity. In general terms, the EU's Middle East policy centers on the idea of mitigating the negative effects of Islamic radical movements on the stability and security of Europe. This stance is particularly relevant to the EU's relations with Hamas. Indeed, the EU attempted to undermine Hamas' influence as soon as it came to power via democratic elections in 2006. It attempted to ensure Hamas' compliance with the demands of the Middle East Quartet. To achieve this, the EU used economic sanctions and political pressure as its coercive instruments. However, this approach was completely in consistent with the EU's own democratic and liberal principles

The promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are the cornerstone principles of the EU. But, the EU has been disregarding the violations of human rights perpetrated by the State of Israel and failing to see humanitarian dimension of the conflict. It gives priority to self-interest and identity concerns over the commitment to its declared norms and values. This stance has not only eroded the EU's credibility, but also strengthened its poor image as a supporter of authoritarian and repressive governments. More importantly, the EU's inconsistent policies will not contribute to its long-term security, which the EU has been attempting to reinforce via its external relations.

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