



European Contestations of EU Democracy Support in Palestine

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Abstract

On October 7, 2023, Hamas and other armed Palestinian groups launched fatal attacks in southern Israel. Since then, the Israeli military has conducted relentless operations in Gaza, killing and injuring tens of thousands of Palestinians. This has brought the “Palestine question” back onto the agenda. Inner-EU differences – between EU institutions as well as among EU member states – have become increasingly apparent, and an unprecedented Palestinian solidarity movement has emerged within Europe. October 7 had the potential to become a turning point for EU-Palestine relations, including in the field of democracy support.

Against this backdrop, this paper traces discursive practices on EU democracy support since October 7 in a context of lacking functioning statehood and democratic institutions in Palestine, and of ongoing violence during the studied period of reflection. Accordingly, not many discursive practices on EU democracy support in a narrow sense could be observed; therefore, the study analyses “framework conditions for democracy” as well as the “democratic-ness” of EU practices, extending the scope to EU discourses on Israel.

The article consists of four parts. Firstly, it outlines the general background of the case study to contextualise developments and narratives since October 7. Secondly, it maps relevant actors and works out the general contours of their narratives. Thirdly, it analyses some important sub-aspects of narratives. Lastly, it provides concluding remarks. This study combines in-depth qualitative analysis of written sources (EU documents, statements, speeches, press releases, policy briefs, etc.) with semi-directive interviews with EU officials and actors contesting EU narratives.

Introduction

On October 7, 2023, Hamas and other armed Palestinian groups launched fatal attacks in southern Israel. Since then, the Israeli military has conducted relentless operations in Gaza, killing and injuring tens of thousands of Palestinians. This has brought the “Palestine question” back on the agenda. Inner-EU differences – between EU institutions as well as among EU member states (MS) – have become more and more apparent, and an unprecedented Palestinian solidarity movement has emerged within Europe. October 7 thus had the potential to be a turning point for EU-Palestine relations, including in the field of democracy support (DS).

In this study we follow the instructions provided in the conceptual paper of WP4 (Huber et al., 2023). However, Palestine is a very specific case, because of the very fact that there is no Palestinian state, because of Israeli occupation, and because of the ongoing violence in the studied period of reflection. Accordingly, not many discursive practices on EU DS in a narrow sense could be observed but we had to rather analyse “framework conditions for democracy” as well as the “democratic-ness” of EU practices. Moreover, DS for Palestine cannot be studied without addressing the underlying factors, most importantly the occupation, and we hence included EU discursive practices on Israel, too.

The article consists of four parts. Firstly, we outline the general background of the case study to contextualise developments and narratives since October 7. Secondly, we map relevant actors and work out the general contours of their narratives. Thirdly, we analyse some important sub-aspects of narratives. Lastly, we provide concluding remarks. In this study, we combine in-depth qualitative analysis of written sources, (EU documents, statements, speeches, press releases, policy briefs, etc.) with semi-directive interviews with EU officials and actors contesting EU narratives.

1 Background Section: Context and Pre-October 7 Narratives

1.1 The Question of Democracy in EU-Palestine Relations Pre-October 7

As interviewee 3 pointed out, the conditions for democratisation in Palestine are not given, because there are two peoples with very different rights living in the area spanning from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. This is the result of decades-long Israeli occupation and annexation. Israel has kept tight control over the most important governance aspects, settlements have been gradually expanded, and an apartheid system has been established (Amnesty International, 2022; HRW, 2021). Israeli governments have never shown interest in allowing Palestine to become a (democratic) state, including the new ultra-right government formed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in late 2022.

Against this backdrop, the score of Palestine in the [Economist Intelligence Unit's](#) Democracy Index has gradually fallen from 6.01 in 2006 to 3.47 in 2023. The last legislative elections in Palestine were held in 2006. While they were largely described by its own observation mission as free and fair, the EU did not recognise the result (i.e., the slight Hamas victory over Fatah). Since then, Hamas has ruled undemocratically in Gaza, and the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA) has governed (parts of) the West Bank in an increasingly authoritarian fashion (Amnesty International, 2021; Asseburg, 2024c). No presidential elections were held since Fatah-leader Mahmoud Abbas was elected in 2005. Thus, the most powerful local actors (i.e., consecutive Israeli governments, Hamas, the PA) have not shown interest in democratisation.

Several interviewees (4, 5, 6, 7) stressed that democratisation has never been a priority for the EU and has not played a major role for discursive and/or behavioural EU practices. In the [European Joint Strategy in Support of Palestine, 2021-2024](#), “Democracy, Rule of Law, and Human Rights” is one of five pillars. However, only EUR 25m out of a total of EUR 1.177bn of EU finances therein are allocated for this pillar (a mere 2%). At the same time, the EU has long been the biggest donor to the PA and the main provider of aid to Palestine. It allocated EUR 1.28bn under the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) for 2017-2020, and EUR 1.15bn under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) for 2021-2024.

While the EU has long provided aid, it has never concretely acted upon Palestinians’ right to self-determination, despite its rhetorical commitment. Since the 2000s, more and more European policymakers have sided with and supported the Israeli state without any condition relating to the “peace process” and Palestinian statehood (Haddad, 2021). Israel was hence successful in decoupling its relations with the EU from the “Palestine question” (Interview 6). Some critics argue that EU DS has never been about democratising Palestine but rather about sustaining the status quo of occupation – for which the EU would effectively be paying with its large aid (Dana, 2023).

1.2 EU Narratives and Contestation Pre-October 7

As several interviewees (4, 5, 6) pointed out, the “Palestine question” has been sidelined in EU discourses in the last decades. Narratives in the pre-October 7 period were characterised by continuation, dominated by several ever-recurring themes.

Only few aspects of DS in a narrow sense were part of EU narratives. For example, support for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) has long been named as a key priority, as illustrated in the [Joint European Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in Palestine 2018-2020](#). Therein, the EU highlights that support for CSOs “is all the more important in the absence of functioning democratic governance structures and adequate representation for Palestinians.” Yet, contesting discursive practices

emphasised that the EU does not fund some Palestinian CSOs, as a consequence of Israel's designation of reputable human rights non-governmental organisations as terrorist (Dana 2023). Another common element of the EU narrative has been to call for elections (e.g., EEAS, 2019; EP, 2022; Foreign Affairs Council, 2023).

Palestinians' right to self-determination has been an integral part of the EU's narrative since the [Venice Declaration](#) from 1980. The two-state solution mantra has also been part of the EU's narrative for decades, and respective references can be found in all major strategic security documents, such as the [European Security Strategy of 2003](#) or the [Global Strategy of 2016](#). This, however, has long been contested by observers who argue that the time for two states is long over (Pace, 2010; Slaughter, 2013). Some call for one democratic state instead (Karmi, 2007; Tilley, 2010), others for a confederation (Beilin, 2015; Scheindlin and Waxman, 2016). Behind closed doors, it has become more and more common among EU officials to regard the two-state solution as "dying in front of our eyes," as one Jerusalem-based EU representative stated in August 2022 (cited in Strömbom and Persson, 2023: 8).

One notable contestation of the EU's narrative was the description of the reality in Palestine as apartheid, both in reports of human rights organisations (Amnesty International, 2022; B'Tselem, 2021; HRW, 2021) and in Academic scholarship (Waxman, 2022; Yiftachel, 2005). Such an assessment contests the EU's characteristic description of Israel as the "only democracy in the region," as well as the settler colonial context by evidencing the much bleaker reality on the ground in the occupied Palestinian territories. The EU has largely chosen to ignore these assessments. In a passing comment, the then-HR Josep Borrell (2023a) answered a question by MEPs in early 2023 saying that "the Commission considers that it is not appropriate to use the term apartheid in connection with the State of Israel." Amongst at least some EU officials, however, this is less clear, as one Brussels-based EU official declared in November 2022: "while the EU is not ready to agree on the apartheid narrative, many EU officials recognise many features of apartheid on the ground" (cited in Strömbom and Persson, 2023: 10; see also Interview 5).

Lastly, already before October 7, it was clear that positions within the EU differ significantly (Akgül-Açıkmeşe et al., 2023). Lack of unity was exemplified by diverse votes of EU MS in major decisions such as the 2011 UNESCO vote to designate Palestine a full member, or the UN General Assembly vote to upgrade Palestine's status in 2012. Right wing populist parties also contested aspects of the EU's narrative. The Polish PiS, for example, embraced the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem in 2019, which was against the established EU narrative to not recognise Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem (Dyduch and Müller, 2021: 579-580).

2 Actors Mapping and General Contours of Post-October 7 Narratives

2.1 EU Narrative(s) and Internal Contestation

Overall, we observed conflicting discursive practices amongst MS as well as amongst EU institutions and individual office holders. Most interviewees (1, 4, 5, 6, 7) argued that there has not been one coherent EU narrative and that internal divisions became even more apparent since October 7. According to interviewee 6, this goes as far as questioning long-held common positions, such as not moving embassies to Jerusalem. The reasons for the lack of a common narrative are manifold, and several interviewees (3, 4, 5) emphasised the issue of unanimity in decision-making. In any case, the official EU narrative has often represented the lowest common denominator, showcasing the "paralysis of the EU" (Interview 7). Researchers have equally pointed to EU-internal divisions as a

hindrance to joint practices (AchRAINER and Pace, 2025; Fantappi  and Tocci, 2023; Kausch, 2024a; Scazzieri, 2023, 2024).

In the weeks following October 7, EU officials performed many discursive practices emphasising the EU's unconditional support for Israel. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stood out in that context, providing clear descriptions of characters, the setting, and the plot: "Israel is a democracy, attacked by Hamas, a terrorist organisation. Israel has the right of self-defence [...] And it was clear that, through its terrorist activities, Hamas is also bringing harm to the Palestinian people. Hamas has provoked a humanitarian crisis in Gaza" (von der Leyen, 2023). On many occasions, she was accompanied by EP President Roberta Metsola who was equally active in showing support for Israel.

Their stances were contested internally. As Luigi Scazzieri (2023) emphasised, von der Leyen's "initial unwillingness to call on Israel to respect international humanitarian law in its fight against Hamas contrasted sharply with the approach of other EU leaders such as High Representative for foreign policy Josep Borrell." Notably, while von der Leyen and Metsola became quieter over time and hardly performed discursive practices once the suffering of Palestinians became increasingly apparent, Borrell became more outspoken towards the end of his mandate as HR, for example asking for cutting political dialogue with Israel (Borrell, 2024c, 2024d) and being very direct in his criticism of Israel (Borrell, 2024e).

Moreover, EU MS had immense difficulties in reaching any consensus on the Palestine file. According to Martin Kone n y (2024), MS can be clustered in three groups: 1) those who back Israel's military campaign without substantive criticism (e.g., Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary); 2) those who call for a ceasefire and criticize Israel (e.g., Belgium, Ireland, Spain); 3) those who hardly perform meaningful discursive practices. Members of the second group are the main internal contesters of the EU's narrative. Irish President Michael D Higgins, for example, early on made clear that von der Leyen was "not speaking for Ireland" (cited in Wilcock, 2023). Spanish Minister for Social Rights Ione Bellara stressed that "the display of hypocrisy, which the European Commission is showing, is unacceptable" (cited in Keeley, 2023).

Given the divisions between MS, the European Council often could not agree and hence only produced weak conclusions. In fact, the Council debated terminology for months and remained split over whether to demand a humanitarian pause or a ceasefire, until, in March 2024, it called for "an immediate humanitarian pause leading to a sustainable ceasefire" (European Council, 2024a: 7). When Josep Borrell proposed sanctions on violent settlers in December 2023, his suggestion was blocked by Hungary and the Czech Republic (Kausch, 2024a: 6). Votes on UN General Assembly resolutions on Gaza on 27 October 2023 and on 12 December 2023 also showed the deep split amongst EU MS.

In the EP, especially the Leftist Group proposed motions much more critical of Israeli crimes in the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank, for example asking for a suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement (AA) and referring to apartheid and genocide (EP, 2024), hence contesting all four elements of the EU's narrative. Already in the days after October 7, nine Irish MEPs publicly criticised von der Leyen who has "made the EU look both disjointed and cruel" (cited in Matthews, 2023).

Hence, EU-internal divisions have been very apparent from the beginning, and EU leaders have been aware of this. Borrell (2024a) openly affirmed difficulties in bringing together MS (in the case for example of supporting UNRWA which has been banned by Israeli law from operating in the occupied Palestinian territories): "My job – a difficult one by the way – is to try to put all Member States together

in a common position, and I will not contribute to show the divisions amongst us, which are quite clear.”

2.2 External Contestation of EU Narrative(s)

Many Brussels-based CSOs contested the EU’s narrative for not being critical enough of Israel and for not sufficiently recognising Palestinian rights. This includes the [European Middle East Project \(EuMEP\)](#) (and especially its director Martin Konečný), [Al Haq Europe](#), [ACT Alliance EU](#), and [EuroMed Rights](#) which aims to strengthen “respect for international law, equality and human rights, including Palestinians’ right to self-determination, in the EU and Member States’ bilateral relations with Israel and the Palestinian Authority.” Several large international NGOs, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have also been contesting EU narratives.

The [European Coordination of Committees and Associations for Palestine \(ECCP\)](#) clearly describes the EU as a villain by stating on its website: “The European Union is complicit with the colonial and apartheid regime of the State of Israel, through not respecting its duty of non-recognition and non-assistance of Israeli occupied territories, and through enabling a climate of impunity surrounding the state’s actions.” The [European Palestinian Council for Political Relations \(EUPAC\)](#) specifically addresses EU institutions and MEPs, and EUPAC Coordinator Ahmed Frassini stresses that “[w]e noticed that we have a massive lack of narration. Pro-Palestinian activists crying and shouting in the streets, in Gaza and the occupied territories, are not the only answer. A lot of the MEPs do not get this kind of message” (interview in Łobodziński, 2023).

Some researchers at Brussels-based Think Tanks produced discursive practices contesting the EU’s narrative, too.¹ Julien Barnes-Dacey, Anthon Dworkin, and Hugh Lovatt from the [European Council on Foreign Relations \(ECFR\)](#), for example, wrote more than 20 (mainly short) articles. Kristina Kausch from the [German Marshall Fund \(GMF\)](#) and Luigi Scazzieri from the [Center for European Reform](#) each published several articles. [Carnegie Europe](#) researchers remained remarkably silent, except for five “Judy Asks”-editions in the Strategic Europe Blog. Other Brussels-based Think Tanks did not publish anything, including the [EU Institute for Security Studies \(EUISS\)](#), the [Centre for European Policy Studies \(CEPS\)](#), the [European Policy Center \(EPC\)](#), [Bruegel](#), and the [Jaques Delors Institute](#). Of the large Think Tanks based in EU MS, some contributed to the discourse with a few publications, such as the [Clingendael Institute in the Netherlands](#), the [Barcelona Center for International Affairs \(CIDOB\)](#), [Istituto Affari Internazionali \(IAI\)](#), or [Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik \(SWP\)](#).

Moreover, some media platforms (e.g., [EU Observer](#) or [Politico](#)) have been used for contestation by some journalists, such as Shada Islam or David Cronin. The latter has also written dozens of EU-critical blog pieces at [The Electronic Intifada](#). Lastly, student activists have been very active, but they hardly addressed EU narratives but rather focused on the positions of their respective universities, demanding an Academic boycott (Interviews 1 and 2).

3 Selected Elements of EU Narratives and Contestation Post-October 7

3.1 International Law and the Rules-Based International Order

The occupying power’s breaches of international law have long been a major obstacle for democratisation in Palestine. Against the backdrop of illegal occupation, settlement development,

¹ Think Tanks normally do not take a stance as institutions, but researchers express their personal opinions. Hence, Think Tanks are not coherent actors, but individual staff members can produce conflicting discursive practices.

ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, a democracy can hardly develop. To be perceived as a legitimate DS actor, the EU must lead by example and respect the rule of (international) law. The rules-based international order is important for all four elements of the narrative: description of character (Are the actors breaking the law described as villains? Are the victims described as such?), setting and plot (Are breaches of international law clearly articulated to describe the situation on the ground?), moral of the story (Does the EU draw adequate conclusions?).

In the days after October 7, especially von der Leyen and Metsola, stressed Israel's right to defend itself without any restrictions. This was contested by EuroMedRights (2023): "It is disturbing that the response from the EU is not a call for de-escalation of violence but rather an unconditional support for Israel's right to defend itself which will be taken as a *carte blanche* [...] The EU should call the Israeli government to strictly abide by international humanitarian law." Indeed, the EU soon started to speak of "Israel's right to defend itself in line with international law," which was found in almost all analysed documents and includes a clear description of the plot and a characterisation of Israel as the victim. It has, however, remained an empty slogan, because European policymakers have avoided to comment on whether Israel is, in fact, violating international law (Interview 6; Dworkin, 2023; Lynch, 2024).

Overall, international law has been mentioned in rather vague terms in EU narratives, and the actor breaching international law has been named selectively: While Hamas is called out in almost all documents, Israel is hardly mentioned, suggesting that Israel is solely a victim in the EU's narrative. In many documents, passive language is used, and requests to comply with international law are not explicitly addressed at Israel (DG ECHO, 2024b; EEAS, 2024b; EP, 2023; European Council, 2024a, 2024b). Only Borrell (2023b, 2024b, 2024d) called out Israel by name in several statements. Outside actors were much clearer. ACT Alliance EU (2024), for example, urged the EU to take action, arguing that "[d]espite the Israeli government's assurances that it is, and has always been, complying with international law, facts on the ground seem to indicate the contrary."

Within the EU's narrative, the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza was frequently stressed, but there was hardly mention of who is responsible. Most discursive practices did not describe the suffering of Palestinians as the consequence of a human-made international law breach but often sounded like being made after a natural disaster without a (human) perpetrator (except for Hamas). Israel was not named as the key actor hindering the influx of humanitarian aid in different Council Conclusions (European Council, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b). In the [news section on EU aid for Gaza at the Commission's website](#), the devastating situation in Palestine is largely portrayed as if no one is "doing" the harm. In many press releases, the word Israel does not even appear, for example in the statement on the risk of famine (DG ECHO, 2023) or the statement on attacks against health facilities (DG ECHO, 2024a).

EU discursive practices in response to decisions by international courts remained vague, too. After the ICJ requested that Israel must take measures to avoid a genocide, the HR and the Commission (2024) only published a very short statement, acknowledging the decision without demanding Israeli compliance. Most EU discursive practices only vaguely stressed that all parties must abide by court decisions (DG ECHO, 2024b; European Council, 2024a, 2024b). Within the EU, mainly Borrell (2024b) contested this vagueness, for example after the ICJ ruling that Israel must stop its offensive on Rafah when he asked "the government of Israel to respect fully this Court order." 21 MEPs published an [open letter](#) on 25 July 2024, urging the EU to acknowledge the ICJ's advisory opinion on the illegality of occupation and to initiate a "drastic change" in EU policies. Outside actors also contested the EU's reluctance to act upon court orders, for example Think Tank researchers (Dworkin, 2024a, 2024b;

Lovatt 2024b, 2024c). Several CSOs signed an [open letter](#) demanding that EU MS must implement the ICC arrest warrants, and in another [open letter](#), CSOs requested that the EU must comply with the ICJ advisory opinion on the illegality of occupation.

A similar pattern can be observed in the way in which the EU reacted to Israeli disrespect for the UN. The European Council (2024b), for example, “stresses that the services UNRWA provides in Gaza and across the region are essential and condemns any attempts to label a UN agency as a terrorist organisation,” but it does not say who tries to do so. After the Knesset adopted a law banning UNRWA from operating in Israel, the Council of the EU (2024) released a statement, emphasising the importance on UNRWA, without asking Israel to revoke the law. This weak response was contested by some, such as EuroMed Rights (Ben Jemia and Boserup, 2024).

Several actors contested the lack of meaningful action and hence the moral of the story, demanding a review of the EU-Israel AA. In March 2024, the Foreign Affairs Council (2024) solely reported on the “exchange of views on the EU-Israel Association Agreement,” but most MS rejected a substantial review. This, however, was a demand of several researchers (Barnes-Dacey and Lovatt, 2024; Lovatt 2024d) as well as CSOs (ACT Alliance EU, 2024; EuroMed Rights, 2024), many of whom signed respective open letters on [19 March 2024](#), on [26 August](#), and on [19 September](#).

3.2 Palestinian Statehood and the Right to Self-Determination

The right to self-determination is a core democratic principle, and establishing a democratic system without a state and under occupation is impossible. Hence, the right to self-determination is clearly connected to EU DS and is related to the four aspects of narratives: character (Who is hindering Palestinian statehood? Which actors are legitimate representatives?), setting and plot (How is the situation on the ground described?), moral of the story (What should the EU do?).

Shortly after October 7, Ursula von der Leyen has on several occasions not mentioned Palestinian statehood and the EU’s support for a two-state solution when addressing the conflict (Barigazzi and Sorgi, 2023). In response, 798 staff members of the Commission wrote a letter, asking von der Leyen to stress the right of Palestinian self-determination. Overall, the two-state solution mantra has been upheld, however. On 15 October, the European Council (2023a) stated: “We remain committed to a lasting and sustainable peace based on the two-state solution.” Comparable statements were made by all EU institutions (DG NEAR, 2024; EP, 2023; European Council, 2024a; Foreign Affairs Council, 2024). Nevertheless, the EU still does not recognise Palestine as a state and argues that this should only be done with Israeli approval and as part of an agreed upon political settlement.

Being dissatisfied with EU inaction, Ireland, Spain, and Slovenia decided to recognise Palestine in May/June 2024, and several researchers called upon the EU to do so as well (Bargués and Bourekba, 2024; Lovatt, 2024b, 2024c; most experts in Dempsey, 2024). Yet, the feasibility of the two-state solution has remained contested, for example by most contributors to a “Judy Asks” piece (Dempsey, 2023). Some observers argued that “the EU has [solely paid] lip service to the two-state-solution” (Kausch, 2024a). Others pointed out “that the Palestinian right to self-determination is not conditional upon Israeli approval, nor upon the outcome of negotiations” (Lovatt, 2024c). This point is crucial, because consecutive Israeli governments have been very clear in their rejection of a Palestinian state (EFE, 2024). In July 2024, the Knesset overwhelmingly voted in favour of a respective resolution, which remarkably did not trigger any substantial EU reaction.

October 7 has revived debates about the governance of Palestine. The EU has been very clear that Hamas cannot be involved (Lazaroff, 2023) and still regards the PA as the only legitimate (and feasible)

representation of Palestinians (EEAS, 2024a; European Council, 2023a, 2023b, 2024b). In July 2024, the Commission and the PA signed a letter of intent on budgetary support aimed at “stabilising the Palestinian Authority” (DG NEAR, 2024). Some observers see the PA more critically, and interviewee 7 argued that supporting the PA has always meant cementing the status quo (i.e., to normalise the occupation). Others argue that there will be no way to not integrate Hamas somehow (Asseburg, 2024a; Lovatt, 2024b).

The EU demands reforms of the PA, however. Borrell (2024e) said that “we need to invest in making the Palestinians Authority and bodies more democratic and legitimate and more efficient.” In a letter of intent from July 2024, the EU declared that “[a]ll disbursements will be based on the Palestinian Authority's progress towards the agreed-upon reform milestones” (DG NEAR, 2024). Hence, aid is conditioned, but as interviewee 6 emphasised, this mainly refers to security and administrative reforms but not democratic reforms. This is contested by some who argue that “the EU will have to apply conditionality to its support of the PA in order to press for judicial independence, the reinstatement of the Palestinian Legislative Council, and the rule of law” (Asseburg, 2024a; see also Barnes-Dacey and Lovatt, 2023).

Remarkably, the EU narrative did hardly include calls for elections, which had been a common feature before October 7. One Commission official from DG NEAR told interviewee 3 that most in the EU would not regard this to be the right time for elections, and interviewee 5 said that EU officials would be afraid of the outcome: Polls show that Palestinians are dissatisfied with the PA, while support for Hamas has grown (PSR, 2024). Ignoring Palestinians’ preferences, however, means to not acknowledge their right of self-determination, which is so crucial for democracy that interviewees 5 and 6 argued that the EU should address this issue much more directly in its DS narratives. Some scholars suggested that the “EU could also take the lead in supporting a path towards elections” (Asseburg, 2024a; see also Lovatt, 2024b).

3.3 Financial Assistance and Civil Society Support

Supporting CSOs has long been a key instrument of EU DS, and it is one of the few direct DS practices which can be observed. Assistance more generally can also be an important DS practice. Again, all four aspects of narratives are concerned: character (Are CSOs described as heroes or villains, and by whom?), plot and setting (What is the role CSOs are expected to play?), moral of the story (Which CSOs should the EU support and how?).

In the days after October 7, a lot of confusion existed surrounding the issue of funding. On 9 October, Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi declared on Twitter the suspension of all EU aid to Palestine (Konečný, 2023). The Commission (2023) – later the same day – released a press release rejecting this announcement declaring instead an urgent review to “ensure that no EU funding indirectly enables any terrorist organisation to carry out attacks against Israel.” This announcement signalled that all Palestinian actors, including CSOs which are normally contemplated as key drivers of democratisation, are considered as potential villains. This was contested by interviewee 6 who argued that such a general scepticism towards CSOs would not be helpful for democratisation.

EuroMed Rights initiated an [open letter](#) to MEPs in March 2024, contesting the idea to making funds more conditional, and in another [open letter](#), some 100 NGOs contested the review of funding and challenged the general suspicion surrounding this review: “The recent announcements by several European donors and the EU itself, implicitly endorse Israel’s unfounded allegations of Palestinian NGOs as having terrorist links.” Sometimes, contesters linked the review to EU-Israel relations,

questioning the moral of the story, such as EuroMed Rights (2023) which recommends “that the announced EU review of its aid to the Palestinian Authority is extended to include a full review of the EU’s political, economic and military engagement with Israel.” Writing for ACT Alliance EU, Mélina Chaput (2024) criticises the EU’s “politicisation of aid.” Defunding of UNRWA was a specifically contested case, with many observers stressing that UNRWA is a hero, not a villain (Asseburg, 2024b; Lovatt, 2024a; Petillo, 2024).

Conclusion

Overall, the EU narrative has not changed significantly since October 7, as also stressed by many interviewees (2, 4, 5, 7). Several ever-occurring discursive practices have been continuously reproduced, yet many have remained rather empty slogans without much substance. Moreover, the narrative has ignored many important aspects – silence can also be a discursive practice – and the EU seemed unwilling to acknowledge “uncomfortable truths”. For example, Israel is not labelled as a villain who breaks international law and is responsible for human suffering, and (non-Hamas) Palestinians are not solely regarded as victims but potentially as villains. The issues of occupation, apartheid, Israeli rejection of Palestinian statehood, settlements and creeping annexations, etc. are not sufficiently included in EU narratives, leaving the setting and plot elements underexposed to these uncomfortable truths. For the moral of the story, this means that the EU does not (have to) consider these issues and can support Israel largely unconditionally.

The missing elements in EU narratives have led to lacking meaningful discursive as well as behavioural practices, or as Kristina Kausch (2024b) has called it “unprincipled paralysis on Gaza.” Josep Borrell (2023b) equally emphasised EU inaction: “Every day we call for a two-state solution, but as the Palestinian representative told me during the UN General Assembly: ‘Apart from calling for it, what are you doing to get it?’”

During the period of reflection, which is still ongoing, the EU narrative has been increasingly contested, both internally as well as by outside actors. The main role of contestation seems to be to lay bare uncomfortable truths to the public as well as EU officials, hence making it more difficult to avoid engaging with them. Indeed, according to interviewee 4, there seems to be increasing awareness within EU institutions that things have long gone too far and cannot be ignored any more. This could be a starting point for learning. Currently, however, many indicators rather point to a continuation of non-learning, and policymakers once again appear to prioritise other issues over DS and Palestinian rights (Interview 5, 6, 7). Moreover, some powerful actors try to prevent the laying bare of uncomfortable truths by silencing contesting voices, for example when invitations for public appearances are cancelled, when street protests are contained, or when individuals feel that their job or funding is at risk.

As a result of EU malpractices as described in this paper, the EU has, in the eyes of many, lost credibility and legitimacy as a DS actor (Interview 1, 2, 5, 7). One reason is obvious hypocrisy: “Never has there been such a sorry display of European double standards than in the parallel wars unfolding in Ukraine and the Middle East today, confirming all the criticism and stereotypes about Europe, from its racism to its Eurocentrism and neocolonial practices” (Fantappié and Tocci, 2023). Surely, the EU has long been seen as a toothless actor in the context of the “Palestine question”, but now it has the image of a villain – this is a dramatic development which will impact EU DS for decades, not only in Palestine (Interview 1, 2, 7).

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List of Interviews

- Interview 1: Student activist. Conducted in-person on 27 November 2024.
- Interview 2: Activist. Conducted in-person on 29 November 2024.
- Interview 3: Scholar and activist. Conducted online on 4 December 2024.
- Interview 4: EU Commission official. Conducted online on 6 December 2024.
- Interview 5: Former EU Commission official. Conducted in-person on 9 December 2024.
- Interview 6: Researcher at major European Think Tank. Conducted online on 13 December 2024.
- Interview 7: Researcher at major European Think Tank. Conducted online on 16 December 2024.