



Democracy and Security in EU Foreign Policy Practices in Palestine

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	4
Introduction.....	5
1 Conceptual definition of democraticness.....	5
2 Assessing Democraticness of EU Foreign Policy Practices in Palestine	7
2.1 A security-first paradigm.....	7
2.1.1 Social empowerment	8
2.1.2 Social embeddedness	9
2.1.3 Social accountability.....	10
3 Absence of (un)learning	11
Conclusion	13
Bibliography	14
List of interviews.....	15

Abstract

This paper critically examines the democratic quality of the European Union's (EU) foreign policy in Palestine, focusing on security and civil society support. Using the framework of social embeddedness, empowerment and accountability, it assesses whether EU interventions foster genuine democratic practices or reinforce technocratic, externally driven governance. The analysis examines EU policies in the wake of the 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks and the subsequent intensification of Israel's violence on Gaza and the West Bank, highlighting how these events exposed contradictions and critical limitations in the EU's democracy and security interventions.

Findings show that EU security initiatives, such as EUPOL COPPS, prioritise technical capacity-building over inclusive governance, sidelining grassroots actors and reinforcing elite-dominated structures. EU support for civil society disproportionately benefits donor-dependent NGOs, imposing conditions that limit political engagement and marginalise local movements and claims for self-determination. Accountability mechanisms for affected communities are weak, and EU policies often align with external security interests, particularly Israel, rather than Palestinian democratic needs. The paper concludes that meaningful (un)learning requires shifting toward locally embedded, rights-based strategies that empower Palestinian actors, strengthen accountability and promote democratic governance aligned with Palestinian aspirations.

Introduction

The European Union (EU) has long positioned itself as an actor committed to supporting democracy in the Southern Neighbourhood and Palestine, including through its foreign policy instruments. Since the early 1990s, democracy support has been an important pillar of EU external relations, evolving through a range of tools and strategies aimed at strengthening democratic governance in its partner countries. However, despite the EU's extensive engagement with third countries on democratic reforms, a systematic investigation of the democratic quality as well as a focus on continuity and changes in its foreign policy, particularly in relation to democratic norms, has remained underexplored in the literature. Furthermore, much of the existing research has focused on isolated policy sectors (e.g., trade, aid, migration) without delving into the broader question of how these diverse fields interact with democratic practices on the ground.

This paper seeks to address this gap by examining the democraticness of EU policies in the field of democracy and security in Palestine, with particular attention to the shifting dynamics in the wake of significant historic critical junctures. The central research question driving this research is: *How democratic are EU practices in the field of democracy and security in Palestine, and what changes can be observed in these practices following 7 October 2023, especially in terms of social empowerment, social embeddedness and social accountability?* By analysing these dimensions, the paper aims to offer insights into how EU policies can either support or undermine democracy in Palestine and assess whether the EU's engagement in Palestine has become more or less democratic in the face of recent developments.

This study draws from the conceptual and empirical work of Khakee and Wolff (2021) on EU democracy projection, examining EU's everyday interactions in the Southern Neighbourhood in various policy fields (e.g., trade, gender, civil society) to explore whether these interactions uphold democratic norms. Extending their work, this paper will focus on the assessment of democraticness of EU foreign policy in Palestine. The developing realities of Palestinian politics in a context of Israeli unlawful occupation and settler colonialism present a key case-study to assess how democratic norms are challenged or reinforced *in EU practices by EU practices*, particularly in its foreign policy.

This paper is based on both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources include policy and academic literature on EU policies in Palestine, particularly in the areas of security and civil society engagement. Primary data are based on semi-structured interviews with civil society actors and experts in Palestine, conducted via Zoom in July and September 2024. These focused on perceptions of the democratic nature of EU foreign policy in Palestine, especially in relation to security governance and civil society (CSO) support. Participants were informed of the research purpose and gave their consent. All interviews have been anonymised in accordance with ethical guidelines.

1 Conceptual definition of democraticness

To examine the democraticness of EU foreign policy, with a focus on EU security instruments and CSOs support in Palestine, this paper will employ a conceptual framework based on three interrelated dimensions of democracy in external practices: *social embeddedness, social empowerment, as well as social accountability.*

Social embeddedness refers to the degree to which EU security policies are integrated into and responsive to local social, political and cultural contexts. In the case of Palestine, this involves considering how EU democracy support and interventions in the security sector and CSOs support align with Palestinian realities and whether these policies incorporate local actors and knowledges in meaningful ways. EU policies in the field of security and democracy are assessed on their inclusivity and transparency, specifically whether they include not only state-level/elite actors but also Palestinian civil society and affected communities. As the EU increasingly pursues a more “top-down” approach to security, the question arises as to whether these policies respect the agency, local ownership and needs of local communities or whether they risk imposing external models that disregard the context of occupation and settler colonialism.

For instance, the EU’s support for Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces through initiatives like EU the Police Mission in the Palestinian Territories (EUPOL COPPS) raises critical questions about whether these efforts have embedded local needs into security initiatives and reforms or whether they have, in effect, further entrenched a political order that marginalises certain actors within Palestinian society. *Social embeddedness* also examines whether EU-funded security and CSOs support policies are transparent and accountable, with affected communities having access to relevant information and the ability to influence decision-making processes. This dimension interrogates whether the EU’s approach to security is participatory and if it supports democratic engagement at all levels, including the inclusion of grassroots organisations, marginalised groups and women.

On the other hand, *social empowerment* concerns the capacity of EU policies to either foster democratic practices from within Palestinian society or, conversely, impose external (democratic) models that may be misaligned with local needs. This dimension is closely related to the idea of democracy as a “pluriversal” concept, which recognises that democratic practices are shaped by historical, social and cultural factors.¹

Do EU behavioural practices engage with Palestinian aspirations for democracy, or do they focus on narrow definitions of security interests, potentially sidelining the needs of local civil society and grassroots actors? *Social empowerment* also entails the recognition of Palestinian rights of self-determination, questioning whether EU policies seek to empower local institutions and actors to address their own security challenges, or whether they merely seek to stabilise a political system that serves external perceptions of security.

Finally, *social accountability* refers to the mechanisms through which those affected by EU policies – particularly the Palestinian population – are able to hold EU actors accountable for the outcomes of their security interventions. This dimension encompasses the availability of avenues for feedback, participation, and the possibility for policy reforms based on local concerns. Accordingly, for EU security practices to be considered democratic, mechanisms for Palestinian civil society and grassroots actors to engage in the policy process should be in place, including the evaluation of ongoing EU security projects. In Palestine, the issue of accountability takes on added significance due to the power imbalances inherent in the EU-Palestinian relationship, which operates as a funder-beneficiary dynamic. The paper will explore whether

¹ In the Palestinian context this means an evaluation of whether EU interventions in the security sector and CSO support respect and amplify local democratic imaginaries or whether they impose a standardised model of democracy, often based on EU norms that may not resonate with Palestinian realities.

these accountability mechanisms are present or whether EU policies are practiced without sufficient checks, leaving local populations disenfranchised and disempowered.

2 Assessing Democraticness of EU Foreign Policy Practices in Palestine

This conceptual framework will guide the analysis of EU security practices in Palestine, particularly reflecting on changes (if any) following the selected critical juncture of 7 October 2023, date of the Hamas attacks in Israel and intensification of Israel's violence on Palestinian people in Gaza and West Bank. The framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how EU interventions in democracy support and in the security sector might reinforce or challenge democracy in Palestine, taking into account local dynamics and the broader political context. Through this lens, the paper evaluates whether EU security sector policies and CSOs support are contributing to the promotion of democratic practices or whether they are exacerbating existing power imbalances.

By examining the evolving EU approach to Palestine in general and to its security in particular, the paper seeks to offer insights into how the EU can enhance the democratic quality of its foreign policy practices, particularly in conflict-affected contexts like Palestine. The following sections will explore the historical context of EU foreign policies in Palestine, the democraticness of EU policies in the fields of security and CSO support in the context of key turning points, and the democracy implications of these (non-)changes in terms of social embeddedness, social empowerment and social accountability.

2.1 A security-first paradigm

Since the early 1990s, the European Union has positioned itself as a key actor in the Middle East, particularly in Palestinian territories, where it has focused on supporting state-building efforts and peace processes. As outlined by Tartir (2018), in the wake of the Oslo Accords (1993–1999), the EU and its member states began to channel substantial financial and technical resources into creating the institutions of a future Palestinian state. The approach was clear: by establishing effective governance structures – including security apparatuses – the Palestinians could eventually transition toward a democratic system capable of securing lasting peace and stability. However, from the outset, the EU's security interventions have been marked by a “security-first” paradigm (Tartir, 2018) that privileged control over democratisation.

Early EU interventions focused on establishing the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a quasi-state institution, with initial projects emphasising administrative capacity-building and the development of basic security structures (Bouris, 2014). With the signing of the Oslo Accords, the EU sought to support the nascent PA by financing the expansion of its security forces, an effort that was intended to bolster internal order through security coordination with Israel and provide the groundwork for further political reforms within the PA. Yet, even in these early years, tensions were evident between the imperatives of state-building and the Palestinian desire for self-determination (Tartir, 2018). The technical assistance provided by the EU was designed primarily to support the transformation of the PA's institutions – often with a strong emphasis on law enforcement and counter-insurgency measures – without fully integrating the local political and social context of Palestine as a quasi-/non-state under Israeli occupation and practices of ongoing de facto annexation (Interview 1).

The Second Intifada marked a critical turning point in donors support and consequently in Palestinian practices and reforms in the security sector (Tartir, 2018). Amid widespread violence and the dismantling of earlier institutional gains, the EU was forced to rethink its strategy and tackle the resulting “security vacuum” that necessitated immediate remedial action. In response, the EU, in coordination with other international donors, launched a series of rapid capacity-building programs. Initiatives such as the PA’s 100-Day Reform Plan and the subsequent Road Map for peace were implemented with an urgent focus on reconstructing the security forces, through technical capacity-building: training programs, equipment provision and the professionalisation of security forces were prioritised as essential measures to restore order and create a precondition for further state-building (Bouris, 2014).

After 2007, as the PA embarked on the so-called post-2007 state-building project (Tartir, 2015), EU interventions in the security sector became more institutionalised and extensive. The establishment of the EUPOL COPPS mission exemplified this shift ([Council Joint Action 2005/797/CFSP](#)). Initially launched as a technical support mission for the Palestinian Civil Police (PCP), EUPOL COPPS was gradually transformed into a long-term project with broader objectives. Its non-executive mandate expanded from basic capacity-building to include advising on rule-of-law issues and coordinating EU financial support for security sector reform in Palestine. Yet, these interventions were not implemented in a vacuum. Operating in a context of contested statehood – complicated by Israeli occupation and internal Palestinian political fragmentation – the EU’s efforts to support Palestinian security forces have often had (unintended) consequences that undermined the broader goals of democratic transformation (Bouris and İşleyen, 2018; Bouris, 2019).

Scholars such as Mustafa (2015), Tartir (2018) and Bouris (2019) have argued that EU security policy in Palestine has, in effect, contributed to the entrenchment of authoritarian practices by reinforcing a security apparatus that is more accountable to external donors (as the EU and its Member States) than to the Palestinian citizenry. Dana (2023) further highlights the paradox inherent in the EU’s rhetoric on democracy promotion: while the EU publicly and discursively champions liberal democratic values, its security interventions in Palestine have primarily been designed to enforce stability and control, often defined on terms that serve the interests of external actors (like Israel) and maintain the status quo.

2.1.1 Social empowerment

A core element of the EU’s security policy in Palestine has been its emphasis on technical capacity-building as a means of empowering Palestinian security forces. Through initiatives such as EUPOL COPPS, the EU has sought to instill internationally recognised best practices in policing and public order management. Training programs, modern equipment, and standardised procedures have been central to this process, with the goal of creating a professional security apparatus capable of maintaining order and enforcing the rule of law ([EUPOL COPPS](#)).

In theory, these measures are meant to empower the PA by enabling it to assume greater responsibility for internal security and ultimately to function as a credible, independent state institution. Technical capacity-building, as declared and implemented by the EU, aims to develop the competencies of security personnel and improve organisational effectiveness and professionalism. However, the emphasis on technical reform has also had the unintended consequence of reinforcing a narrow model of empowerment – one that privileges external

standards over local political realities (Bouris, 2019). While Palestinian security forces have undoubtedly benefited from enhanced technical skills, these improvements have often come at the expense of broader democratic participation. The focus on efficiency and operational readiness has meant that capacity-building efforts rarely extend to incorporating mechanisms for local oversight or public accountability (Tartir and Edjus, 2017).

Moreover, as reflected in Dana's (2023) critique of the 2006 elections and subsequent EU practices in Palestine, the technical empowerment of the security apparatus was used to reinforce a stability agenda that favoured – and therefore included or excluded – certain political actors over others. The EU's technical interventions, while declaredly successful in improving operational capacities (Tartir and Edjus, 2017), have been deployed in a manner that sidelines broader political and social empowerment. Rather than fostering inclusive security governance that allows for genuine local input, the emphasis on capacity-building has, in many cases, entrenched the authority of a centralised security establishment (the PA) that is both heavily funded and externally influenced (Tartir and Edjus, 2017).

2.1.2 Social embeddedness

This selective form of social empowerment has also shaped how EU foreign policy practices in the field of security and of support to democratic CSOs were embedded in the Palestinian context.

In the case of EU security policy in Palestine, the approach has been characterised by a strong elitist ownership (Tartir and Edjus, 2017) and external orientation (Bouris, 2019). From the outset, the EU's interventions were premised on the idea that a secure environment was a necessary condition for state-building (Bouris, 2014; Bouris and İşleyen, 2018). However, this approach has securitised the peace process within the Oslo paradigm, established by the 1993 and 1995 accords, which framed negotiations as the sole path to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and fostered the illusion of two equal parties while masking the profound power asymmetry between Israel and the Palestinians. As Bouris (2019) notes, the operationalisation of EUPOL COPPS in the West Bank has produced numerous unintended consequences. Although non-executive in nature, the mission has reinforced power imbalances by aligning its mandates and activities with external actors – most notably Israel – shaping Palestinian state-building around external stabilisation imperatives rather than local democratic aspirations. This external orientation is manifest in the way EU policies are designed: the benchmarks of success are frequently determined by the satisfaction of external partners, particularly Israel, rather than by the extent to which Palestinian needs and perspectives are addressed (Interview 1; Bouris, 2014; Bouris and İşleyen, 2018).

The EU's security policy has thus been embedded in a model that prioritises the normalisation of occupation. This model is fundamentally at odds with the idea of democracy support and democraticness of EU foreign practices as defined in this paper, which requires the integration of local realities and local voices and a bottom-up approach to governance and reform. Instead, the EU's interventions have been driven by a “security-first” logic that treats the occupied Palestinian Territories as a contested space where external stability must be enforced (Interview 1). This approach not only marginalises local political dynamics but also risks perpetuating the very structures of domination – such as the settler-colonial framework – that the EU ostensibly seeks to transform (EEAS, 2023). Dana (2023) encapsulates this paradox by arguing that the

EU's insistence on stability, rather than democratisation, reinforces an external definition of security that ultimately undermines local processes of self-determination.

The limits of the embeddedness of EU foreign policy practices in Palestine are also visible in its CSOs support both before and, more sharply, after the events of 7th October. While the EU formally supports democracy and local ownership, its interventions have often reinforced donor-led and elite-centred models of engagement. Civil society in Palestine, particularly since the Oslo Accords, has been reshaped by a donor-driven paradigm that marginalises grassroots actors in favour of "NGOised" (Dana, 2013) structures more aligned with external expectations.

As one Palestinian interviewee noted, "Since Oslo, civil society in Palestine has increasingly meant NGOs. Unions, social movements and political movements have been marginalised and depoliticised" (Interview 2). The continued politicisation of aid and financially imposed depoliticisation of civil society through clauses or tailored calls for proposals has led to the marginalisation of broader movements, and as the interviewee elaborated further: "The EU has shaped the way civil society looks like in Palestine. It's a donor-driven model where NGOs receive funding but are constrained by conditions that make it difficult for them to engage in any political action" (Interview 2). This critique is supported by an earlier interview, where it was noted that "the European funding model has led to the erosion of grassroots activism in Palestine. Instead of funding locally-driven projects, the EU has prioritised large-scale, donor-driven initiatives that do not reflect the actual needs or aspirations of the people" (Interview 1).

The situation is further complicated by the EU's tendency to impose conditions on Palestinian civil society organisations receiving EU funding. Consequently, in this donor-beneficiary asymmetry, "especially following the 7th October [critical juncture], the EU decides who is a good civil society and who is a bad civil society. [EU donors] fund only those organisations that adhere to the EU agenda, and if an organisation does not comply with their political requirements, it risks losing funding" (Interview 2) This selective approach to funding, which ties assistance to political loyalty or adherence to definitions of acceptable political activity, has significantly limited Palestinian civil society's ability to function freely and hold both local and international actors accountable. As stated by a CSO representative, "That's not democracy, when you need to ask every single participant to your workshop or your collaborators if their family is from an enlisted political faction or whether they are part of any political movement. That's interference and that's basically shrinking our space" (Interview 2).

2.1.3 Social accountability

Accountability is a cornerstone of democratic governance, yet it has proven to be one of the most challenging dimensions for the EU's foreign policy practices in Palestine. The interventions undertaken by the EU – particularly those associated with the security sector – have largely been technocratic in nature, focusing on training, equipment provision, and procedural reforms. Although these measures are implemented with the stated goal of fostering transparency and the rule of law, in practice they often fall short of establishing robust mechanisms of local accountability.

EUPOL COPPS, for example, was introduced with the aim of mentoring the Palestinian Civil Police and promoting civilian oversight. However, as noted by numerous observers, including Tartir (2018), Bouris (2019) and Mustafa (2015), the mission's lack of an executive mandate and its reliance on external standards have contributed to the reproduction of authoritarian practices.

The PA's security forces, empowered through technical training, have evolved into a professionalised yet unaccountable institution. Instead of becoming instruments of democratic governance, they have frequently been used as tools of repression, employed to maintain order and suppress dissent in a context where the interests of external donors and the strategic imperatives of Israel are paramount. This dynamic has reinforced an elite-dominated security structure, where decision-making remains concentrated within EU institutions and the PA's upper echelons. Consequently, the broader Palestinian population has been largely excluded from having a meaningful influence on its governance (Tartir and Edjus, 2017).

Politically, the disconnect between the EU's rhetoric for democracy support and its practical interventions becomes especially apparent in the aftermath of key events, such as the 2006 Palestinian elections. Although the elections were conducted in a manner that was widely recognised as free and fair ([ECFR, 2006 Legislative Elections](#)), the EU's subsequent refusal to engage with the Hamas-led government exposed a significant gap between rhetoric and practice, underscoring how external security and political considerations have often overridden wider local practices and democratic aspirations. This selective approach not only delegitimised the democratic processes in the eyes of many Palestinians (Interview 1; Interview 2; Interview 3) but also underscored how accountability mechanisms were subordinated to external security and political considerations. The lack of effective local oversight in these security interventions has left the PA's security apparatus largely shielded from larger public scrutiny, thus enabling the persistence of practices that are antithetical to democratic accountability (Tartir and Edjus, 2017).

Moreover, the evaluation for EU security interventions are often externally defined, with success not being measured by the extent to which the local population benefits from improved governance (Interview 1; Interview 3). This external calibration of accountability not only undermines the legitimacy of the security forces but also contributes to a broader erosion of public trust in the state-building process and practices in support to democracy. In refugee camps and rural areas in the West Bank, many perceive EU-backed reforms as disconnected from their realities, reinforcing mistrust in a system that doesn't prove to be accountable to local communities (Tartir and Edjus, 2017). In essence, while the EU's security policy has succeeded in creating a technically operative security apparatus, it has simultaneously entrenched power asymmetries and fostered a governance model that is disconnected from the democratic aspirations of the wider Palestinian people. Moreover, by prioritising institutional stability over inclusive participation, the EU has contributed to widen the gap between Palestinian governance structures and the broader Palestinian public (Interview 1; Interview 2; Interview 3), undermining the legitimacy of its interventions and fostering negative perceptions among those directly or indirectly affected by security sector practices under EUPOL COPPS and the Palestinian Civil Police.

3 Absence of (un)learning

Following the attacks on 7 October 2023 by Hamas, and Israel's military campaign on Gaza and escalating violence in the West Bank, the EU's response to the evolving situation in Palestine has brought to light the contradictions in its approach to democracy support and the democratic nature of its practices in foreign policy. While the EU has allocated over 1.16 billion euros in humanitarian aid since 7th October, its policy interventions in the political sphere, beyond the

Comprehensive Programme for Recovery and Resilience with the PA ([European Commission, 2024](#)), confirm significant limitations in its diplomatic and institutional strategies for addressing the complex situation in Palestine (Akgül-Açıkmeşe and Özel, 2024). Besides hindering the EU's ability to address the challenges arising in Israel-Palestine, these limitations indicate a political positioning that favours maintaining structures of control rather than fostering democratic reforms (Interview 1; Interview 2).

The EU's inability to reassess its relationship with Israel and its continued support for the PA and its security apparatus – despite widespread local discontent and the PA's entanglement in sustaining the Israeli occupation – further entrenches structural injustices. This inaction is particularly stark given the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) recent conclusion that Israel's occupation is unlawful, and its preliminary finding that Israel's actions in Gaza may plausibly constitute violation of the rights under the Genocide Convention (ICJ, 2024). At the same time, the ICJ and leading human rights organisations, including Human Rights Watch, B'Tselem, Amnesty International, Al Haq and the UN Special Rapporteur have formally described the Israeli regime across the occupied Palestinian territory as an apartheid structure, citing systemic racial domination and institutionalised discrimination (see Ezzamouri and Zenobio, 2023). Despite this, besides statements calling for a ceasefire, the EU has neither consistently intervened to halt the ongoing structural violence, including in the West Bank, nor has it meaningfully challenged the one-state reality that denies Palestinians fundamental political and civil rights (Interview 1, Interview 2, Interview 3).

Leaked documents related to the EU mission EUPOL COPPS dated 20 December 2023, reveal the EU pondering a strategic role in possibly reinforcing the legitimacy of the PA and positioning as a key actor in Gaza's "post-conflict" governance ([Statewatch, 2024](#)). Although these remain preliminary considerations that, at the time of writing, have yet to materialise at the political decision-making level, without a reassessment of EU approaches and methods in Palestine (an *(un)learning* process, to use [SHAPEDEM-EU terminology](#)), there is real risk of reproducing practices that would further entrench technical security initiatives disconnected from the realities and people on the ground.

As one respondent from Palestinian CSO in West Bank critically argued, prior and after the 7th October "Democracy support under apparent colonial situations is an oxymoron. All forms of democratic support that are applied in other contexts are not applicable to Palestine because it is not a sovereign country, as there is essentially one regime that controls everything, and that is Israel. Meanwhile, in the West Bank and Gaza, there are forms of limited self-governance, but these are structurally incapable of creating a truly democratic system as they stand" (Interview 2).

This comment emphasises that the principles and premises for democracy – namely sovereignty and self-determination – are and continue to be fundamentally absent in the Palestinian context. These principles are often neglected in EU practices, largely due to Israel's ongoing occupation and settler colonial policies, which result as significant structural impediments to the realisation of democratic governance in Palestinian territories. This perspective aligns with an expert interviewee's observation that:

"The EU's emphasis keeps being always on stability, but it completely ignores the undemocratic realities of the situation. The EU continues focusing on the wrong thing as the

reality is that the people in Palestine are not free to decide for themselves. If the EU wants to support democracy and democratic practices in other policy fields, such as security, it has to look at the basic precondition of sovereignty and the ability of people to control their own future” (Interview 1).

The EU’s maintained focus on Israel’s security perceptions also in the aftermath of 7th October, and its support for the PA and its security sector, has overshadowed efforts and needs to foster democratic change. Against this backdrop, the EU has imposed several restrictive measures on its practices in Palestine, particularly affecting Palestinian civil society (Interview 2). These include plans to introduce an anti-incitement clause in funding agreements, which will oblige Palestinian CSOs to pledge not to incite hatred (see WP3 reports). Additionally, European donors, citing unfounded concerns about aid diversion to Palestinian armed groups, have increased scrutiny over funding distribution and in some cases (e.g. by Germany) reduced or cut off support to certain organisations. These measures have created significant challenges for Palestinian civil society, forcing many groups to balance donor conditions with their locally owned missions ([Tartir et al, 2025](#)).

Conclusion

Integrating these reflections, the EU’s foreign policy practices in Palestine are observed here as being characterised by a fundamental conundrum. On one level, the EU’s interventions – through capacity-building, technical assistance and institutional support – are designed to foster an environment that could serve as the foundation for state building and democratic consolidation. On another level, however, the operational reality is that the measures in the policy sector of security and CSOs support have predominantly reinforced a security-first paradigm that privileges external stability over democratic transformation. This paradox is further complicated by the “fuzziness” and performative nature of the Palestinian quasi-state, which remains elusive, characterised by ambiguity and incompleteness in its institutions, governance and territorial sovereignty (Pace, 2018; 2022).

As Dana (2023) and Tartir (2018) argue, the EU’s approach to democracy support in the Palestinian context is marked by contradictions. The rhetoric of liberal democracy and good governance stands in stark contrast to the practices that have emerged from EU interventions – practices that are primarily geared toward professionalising a security apparatus that is unaccountable and externally oriented. Furthermore, the unintended consequences identified by Bouris (2019) reveal that EU-led state-building efforts have often reinforced existing power imbalances, thus contributing to the entrenchment of a status quo rather than catalysing transformative change.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is a governance model in which the promise of empowerment by the EU is undermined by a lack of local ownership, in which externally imposed technical reforms and conditionalities for CSOs are embedded in a framework that is indifferent to local realities, to grassroots democratic processes, and in which accountability is defined by the satisfaction of external strategic interests or perceptions rather than by responsiveness to the Palestinian people. The paradox may not be accidental but rooted in political considerations embedded in a logic of securitised and decontextualised state-building and democratic support practices – a logic that treats stability and control as both a means and an end, even when these

comes at the expense of the rights of Palestinians to self-determination (Interview 1; Interview 2; Interview 3).

Moving forward, the EU should reassess its approach, shifting its focus on state-building and security as adopted and implemented thus far, to practices that foster the social empowerment, embeddedness and accountability of Palestinians, promote wide local ownership and prioritise the fulfillment of Palestinian rights to self-determination. In the crucial words of a respondent, “If the EU would adopt a rights-based approach centring Palestinians rights to self-determination instead of elite centred practices in the field of state-building, security or peace-building, that would change the realities on the ground,” (Interview 2) signalling that a fundamental reframing of the EU’s practices in Palestine – and thus a process of (un)learning – has yet to be initiated and is necessary to align the EU’s democratic and foreign policy practices with the democratic aspirations of the Palestinian people.

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List of interviews

Interview 1: Representative of Palestinian CSO. *Online Interview*. July 2024.

Interview 2: Palestinian independent expert. *Online Interview*. July 2024.

Interview 3: Representative of Palestinian CSO. *Online Interview*. September 2024.