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New EU Member States' Policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: the Case of Poland

Lena Kolarska-Bobińska
Magdalena Mughrabi

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The following report was drafted based on interviews conducted in Poland, Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Jordan. More than 30 interviews were conducted with high-level government officials, ambassadors, lower-ranking officials of various institutions working on foreign policy, journalists, think-tank employees and non-governmental organizations workers.

As a new EU member state, Poland's interest in the Middle East should gradually increase because of the responsibilities that membership imposes. But more important are its own ambitions to shape both regional and global policy. This interest is demonstrated in Poland's growing commitment to contribute to the development of the Global South and work towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Also important are the country's lengthy participation in peacekeeping missions in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the Golan as well as its military presence in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Although Poland is not directly part of the Quartet¹, it is indirectly involved in the Middle East Peace Process by participating in the EU policy. It can thus influence the outcome of Council Conclusions and official statements regarding the conflict. However, its aspirations seem to lie in playing a bigger role in bilateral relations. Given its good relations with both conflicted parties, Poland has shown a certain potential and willingness to become a more important player. This paper will examine the elements, which make up for Poland's policy in the Middle East and the potential it yields to become a more active player in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It will in addition establish whether there is a need for Poland's involvement as a member of the EU and its participation's added value in the context of the new American initiative and the Annapolis Peace conference. Generally the role of New Member States in Middle-East conflict will be analysed.

1. Current Situation – A revival of the Peace Process?

Many EU, American, but also Palestinian and Israeli officials saw a window of opportunity in the new developments on the Palestinian internal political scene following the dramatic infighting of June 2007 between the Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas and the Palestinian National Liberation Movement Fatah. In the words of a Palestinian

¹ The so-called Middle East Quartet includes the United States, United Nations, EU and Russia

official, these are “interesting times” in terms of negotiation prospects². After a week of deadly clashes resulting in over 100 deaths, a bloody cycle of retaliation and scenes of torture in Palestinian society, Hamas eventually achieved to take over the Gaza Strip on 14 June 2007 by attacking the Presidential Compound and the PA security headquarters. Later that day, President Mahmoud Abbas dissolved the national unity government – brokered by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the hope of reconciliation between the 2 parties – and appointed a new emergency government headed by the internationally recognized Finance Minister Salam Fayyad. In his statement that day, Abu Mazen used the strongest language condemning Hamas’ actions denouncing the party as “murderous terrorists” and “coup plotters”³. While many Palestinian officials and independent academics would agree with such a terminology, some point out to the fact that the new “emergency government” established by presidential decree is not constitutional since it has not been ratified by the parliament and is thus contravening Palestinian law.

Blame is put equally on both parties for demonstrating a lack of responsibility, short-sightedness and hunger for power, the international community for imposing sanctions on the Palestinian Authority (PA) following the 2006 elections and Israel for the continuous occupation of the West Bank and Gaza despite disengagement. However, the majority of the population (85%) would like to see a renewal of negotiations between Hamas and Fatah. It seems indeed, that in the eyes of the Palestinians national reconciliation is more important than peace with Israel, where “only” 58 % would like it to happen under present circumstances⁴. This is not to mean that Palestinians are not interested in peace with Israel, but according to public opinion, a sustainable agreement would have to include Hamas. There is indeed a growing sense of divide between the West Bank and Gaza. After the June 2007 events, for West Bankers Gaza is not only a geographically separated entity, but the divide has now become mental and thus much deeper. Suffering from the physical presence of the Israeli occupation in the form of the Wall, which Israel has been building since 2002, checkpoints and road blocks, the population of the West Bank is completely alienated from the plight of the Gazans, especially at a time when

² IPA interview, Palestinian official, Ramallah, August 2007

³ Al-Jazeera News, accessed at <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/88F3E3B9-CFFE-4BCB-BC43-5CD8D72EC138.htm>

⁴ FAFO Poll, “Political Chaos Takes its Toll”, 18 July 2007

many think that it is now governed by a “brutal, merciless force”⁵. However, as much as this divide might be profound, any leader trying to reach a deal with Israel while compromising Palestinian reconciliation and unity would lose credibility and legitimacy since the public would see these actions as a continuation of the Nakba (catastrophe) of 1948 precisely when Palestinian identity started being defined in terms of dispersion and geographical fragmentation⁶.

Despite the concern of the population for unity, the international community has adopted a divisive “West Bank first”⁷ strategy according to conflict resolution experts. It has recognized Salam Fayyad’s government as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and supported it with a renewal of direct financial assistance, boosting Fatah’s security apparatus and creating a window of opportunity for a negotiation process. The rationale is that by creating financial incentives to adhere to the more moderate Palestinian leaders, i.e. Fatah, the Palestinians themselves will become more pragmatic and eventually Hamas will lose popular support. Indeed, the first signal of such an approach was visible in President Bush’s speech on 16 June 2007, in which he defined the choice that lays ahead for the Palestinians: the vision of Hamas, which “would guarantee chaos, and suffering and the endless perpetuation of grievance”, crushing “the possibility of a Palestinian state” diametrically opposed to the one of a “peaceful state called Palestine as a homeland for the Palestinian people”, which could be achieved “by supporting the reforms of President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad”⁸. Thus, his words were converted into action almost immediately by the United States lifting the political and economic embargo on the PA in Ramallah. Additionally, President Bush hopes to strengthen Mahmoud Abbas’ popularity by encouraging bilateral talks with Israel and thereby proving that he is the sole leader, who can deliver peace through negotiations⁹.

⁵ IPA interview, Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Chairman PASSIA, August 2007, Jerusalem

⁶ George Giacaman, “Fatah and Hamas will eventually reconcile”, *The Daily Star*, 24/09/2007

⁷ R. Malley and A. D. Miller, “West Bank First: It Won't Work”, *The Washington Post*, 18/06/2007

⁸ “President Bush Discusses the Middle East”, 16 July 2007, accessed at www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/2007/88506.htm.

⁹ International Crisis Group, “After Gaza”, *Middle East Report N°68*, 2 August 2007

It is in this light that one should read the release of 255 prisoners – the vast majority of them West Bankers and Fatah-affiliated - from Israeli jails on 20 July, and a recent deal negotiated in mid-September 2007 to free another 87, the release of Palestinian tax revenues and financial aid allowing to pay the first salaries of civil servants in the West Bank in months, as well as the President’s attempts to persuade Israel to ease security measures by eliminating some of the checkpoints ruining both Palestinian economy and social life¹⁰.

Meanwhile, following the Gaza events Israel has shut off the main crossing to Gaza – Karni – halting any import and export of raw materials, thus rendering the area even more dependent on international handouts. More recently, Israel has declared the Gaza Strip an “enemy entity” in retaliation to the firing of Qassam rockets on its territory including one, which wounded over 60 soldiers, and announced to take steps, which would contravene its bilateral obligations under international humanitarian law towards the civilian population. Indeed, it has announced on 19 September to completely “disrupt and/or reduce their already limited supply of electricity and fuel”, which constitutes 60 % of Gaza’s overall electrical supply¹¹. In addition, Israeli companies directly supply fuel for the Gaza Power Plant to generate energy¹², thus Israel would only allow enough fuel necessary to power electrical generators in hospitals. Similarly, if the firing of rockets does not stop, border crossings would only remain open for humanitarian aid, essential food and medical supplies – further weakening Gaza’s economy and putting, according to the World Bank, 30 000 jobs in the private sector at risk.

The imposition of new sanctions coincided with Condoleezza Rice’s visit to the region, who immediately expressed her support for Israel’s initiative, confirming that Gaza was also a hostile entity to the United States, while reassuring that the United States “will not

¹⁰ IPA Interview, Palestinian Official, Jericho, August 2007

¹¹ After a petition submitted by 10 Israeli and Palestinian human rights organization, the High Court of Justice ordered the State Prosecution to present data in order to verify that the government’s move would not affect the humanitarian needs of the civilian population. The reaction of the EU to the decision was firm, with EU Commissioner for External Relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner warning against collective punishment.

¹² PLO Negotiations Affairs Department, “Fuelling the Fire: Cutting off Gaza’s Electricity and Fuel”, September 2007

abandon the innocent Palestinians in Gaza”. The discrepancy between diplomatic rhetoric and facts on the ground leaves many Arab governments skeptical about the US-brokered Annapolis meeting. At the time of writing the report, the interviewees’ major concern was that key actors, essential to add legitimacy to the process such as Saudi Arabia were reluctant to participate in the conference without an acceptance of the principles set out in the Arab Initiative, and therefore no promise of real negotiations. It was suggested that the conference would result in declaratory statements, but would not be accompanied by a political commitment to create a conducive environment for transforming words into actions. Additionally, even countries, which have signed bilateral agreements with Israel, such as Jordan and Egypt remained skeptical as 2 months before the scheduled meeting they did not see any real American involvement in the preparation for the talks. Lastly, no comprehensive Middle East Peace Process can take place without Syria, which was repeatedly declaring its lack of interest in participating in the conference at a time when Israel was justifying an air strike on Syrian territory by linking it to Al-Assad’s regime’s alleged weapons of mass destruction program.

The climate in Israel in turn seemed to be in favor of the US initiative. In an act of what many defined as ‘good will’ Olmert agreed to renew relations with the PA and even met with President Abbas in the West Bank town of Jericho. However, the official discourse was maintained in the realm of a broad set of declarations focused on a two-state solution and peace. The mere concept of final-status issues or the Declaration of Principles based on the Clinton Parameters¹³ seemed to be taboo adding further doubts in Palestine as to whether Israel is genuinely interested in peace.

The Gaza takeover emphasized the need for reaching lasting peace in the Middle East in “conformity with the Roadmap”. As a direct result, Tony Blair was appointed as Special Envoy to the Middle East Quartet. The decision was welcomed with enthusiasm in Israel

¹³ Five months after the failure of the Camp David negotiations in 2000, President Clinton has put forth parameters for a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement, to which both Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Chairman of the PLO Yassir Arafat have agreed (with reservations) as a basis for future negotiations. The Clinton Parameters set out a framework for all permanent status issues and envisaged territorial land swaps, dismantling settlements without settlement blocs, a vision for Jerusalem as the capital of both states, international presence in the Jordan Valley and a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem including return to a Palestinian state, Israel or repatriation to a third country and financial compensations.

and within certain political circles in Palestine, leaving however the population skeptical due to his involvement in the invasion of Iraq. Tony Blair was given the mandate to help Palestinian institution-building by mobilizing international assistance in cooperation with donors and “developing plans to promote Palestinian economic development, including private sector partnerships”¹⁴, while working towards the implementation of past agreements on access and movement. Many however suspect – and hope – that Blair will interpret his mandate in a way which will allow more room for diplomacy.

EU reaction to the Gaza Takeover

The EU’s official stance did not differ much from the American and Israeli position. On 18 June, European foreign ministers welcomed and supported the Palestinian President’s decision to proclaim an “emergency government”, isolate Hamas both economically and politically and “resume normal relations with the Palestinian Authority”¹⁵ in Ramallah. Additionally, EU ministers stressed the need to continue their programme of humanitarian assistance in Gaza. On July 9th, the EU took the decision to continue its European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in Rafah in a fully operational mode, while downsizing its staff.

The post-Gaza discourse flowing out of Brussels was in line with the Quartet’s stance - one of optimism, hope and windows of opportunities, negotiations and the peace process. There seems to be however more understanding as to the consequences of a divisive policy towards the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank and Gaza. In an open letter to Tony Blair, and published in “Le Monde” on 10 July, 10 foreign ministers of Mediterranean member states¹⁶ affirmed that the Hamas takeover of Gaza could paradoxically create hope and progress as it has created a new awareness of the extent of the crisis in Palestine:

¹⁴ “Quartet Representative - Quartet Statement”, 27 June 2007, accessed at

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/declarations/94996.pdf

¹⁵ Council of the European Union, PRESS RELEASE 2809th Council meeting General Affairs and External Relations, Luxembourg, 18 June 2007

¹⁶ The 10 member states, which signed the letter, are: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Spain, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Romania and Slovenia.

“The risk of a civil war in the West Bank, threats of partition of Palestine and the come back of Jordanian and Egyptian scenarios pre-1967 could indeed bring a change. Through his determination to favour peace and dialogue, to courageously denounce terrorism, the President of the Palestinian Authority is an invitation for optimism”.

The ministers continued to clarify that their primary objectives are: to provide hope and a genuine solution for the people of the region by resuming final status negotiations, ensuring Israel’s security by exploring the possibility of an international peacekeeping force accompanied by a political process and based on an inter-Palestinian agreement, pressuring Israel to implement policies bolstering Mahmoud Abbas by releasing thousands of prisoners and Palestinian leaders and freezing settlements. Lastly, they warned about the risk in an escalation of violence in the Strip should the Gaza crossings with Israel to the north and Egypt to the south remain completely closed. Additionally, they called for Saudi Arabia and Egypt to help broker reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah. which they essentially call for a return to the principles set out in the Mecca Agreement of March 2007.

As much as there is optimism in Brussels, there seems to be much more scepticism on the ground among EU officials reporting on the daily situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT’s). The decision to embrace Salam Fayyad’s new government and lift economic sanctions however, has paradoxically provided a disincentive for Fatah to reconcile with Hamas, as it presumes that such a situation would lead to assistance being cut-off once again and the restricted contact policy re-implemented. According to EU officials on the ground, the political climate in Ramallah is such that reconciliation is not conceivable in the near future¹⁷. Furthermore, in their eyes, via a policy of no-contact with Hamas in Gaza, the EU’s long-term objectives outlined in the Road Map, i.e. “building the institutions of a democratic, independent and viable Palestinian state, living in peace and security with Israel¹⁸” are being eroded on a daily basis inevitably leading to more radicalization. While humanitarian assistance is crucial in order to prevent the collapse of the PA and a full-scale humanitarian crisis, it is not sustainable and only

¹⁷ IPA Interview, EC official, Jerusalem 2007

¹⁸European Commission website, accessed at http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/gaza/intro/index.htm#2.3

responds to short-term political decisions. Unfortunately, this trend is a reverse of the EU and Quartet's goals set out in the Road Map, i.e. institutional reform and development.

The momentum, which was being built towards the November conference at the time of writing this report – a US-led initiative and seen by many as the revival of the peace process – seemed “surreal in some ways, because it ignored the fact that Gaza is controlled by an entity, which nobody wants to talk to¹⁹”. Even if Mahmoud Abbas and Ehud Olmert negotiated a final status agreement, the Gaza question and the issue of power-sharing on the Palestinian political scene would still remain. In such a context, what is the EU and Poland's potential to influence negotiations? Similarly, what is expected of them by both sides – Palestinians and Israelis in respect to the conflict? Before providing an answer to these questions, it is worth looking into EU involvement in the Peace Process from a historical perspective.

2. EU Policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Long-Term Goals vs. Short-Term Political Decisions

Due to geographic proximity, concern for its own security and stability, historic ties or “moral debt” towards the Middle East, Europe could never afford to stay away from a conflict taking place at its door step. Throughout the years, it has developed a clear position towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict supporting a two state solution and a policy made up of declaratory diplomacy, commercial ties and the promotion of its values of democracy, political reform and the rule of law through development assistance. As one of the members of the Quartet, the European Union officially asserts today that it is committed to “improving the humanitarian and economic situation of the Palestinians, whilst at the same time supporting the Roadmap principles of building the institutions of a democratic, independent and viable Palestinian state, living in peace and security with Israel²⁰”. Furthermore, its position is clear and unified on some of the principles underlying the conflict: it equally condemns terrorism, the expansion of settlements, the construction of the West Bank wall and restrictions on movement. What differs among its

¹⁹ IPA Interview, EC official, Jerusalem 2007

²⁰ European Commission website, accessed at http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/gaza/intro/index.htm#2.3

member states is the ways in which these issues are addressed in terms of declaratory diplomacy. However in recent times, the role of the EU is growing in terms of political and financial involvement. Consequently, expectations are also increasing regarding the EU's involvement in the region's affairs. These expectations are expressed primarily by the Palestinian side, which considers itself as the weaker and more vulnerable side in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Palestinians view the EU as a possible counterweight to the United States and a more objective power, although the interviewees have repeatedly pointed to a cooperation of the EU and United States through the Middle East Quartet.

At the beginning of the Peace Process at both the Madrid Conference in 1991 and in Oslo in 1993, the EU was not represented at all. Its role remained limited to broad declarations, while American diplomacy spearheaded negotiations and ensured contact between both parties of the conflict. Such European invisibility on the Middle Eastern political scene - despite the EU's obvious interest in the region - can be attributed to 2 main reasons. Firstly, its internal lack of cohesion in respect to foreign policy until the High Representative of the EU was appointed through the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997. Secondly, both the Palestinians and the Israelis blindly believed in the United States' mediation power. The Palestinians view the Americans as the only player, who has leverage over Israel; whereas the Israelis believe that the Americans have their best interest in mind and consider them as their primary ally in the region. Thus, for years during the Peace Process Israel preferred to maintain a purely economic relationship with the EU, while investing in the United States politically. By signing the EU Association Agreement in 1995 Israel has arguably fulfilled its strategic goal. According to EU officials, Israel knows that this agreement will never be suspended since the outcome would be a political problem²¹ for the EU. Such a position limits the leverage which the EU possesses with Israel.

The end of an American monopoly on the peace process and its internationalization was spawned by the failure of Camp David in 2000, and the change of administrations in the

²¹ According to Tocci (2005), the EU considers maintaining its ties in the Mediterranean as extremely important politically and economically. As no country in the Barcelona Process has a perfect human rights recording, the suspension of the Association Agreement with Israel would be a precedent, which could lead to an eventual suspension of all agreements.

United States. Whereas Bill Clinton was determined “to devote as much of his presidency as it took to make the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations succeed”²² and insisted on the urgency of the matter, the Bush administration was since 9/11 more preoccupied with the Global War on Terror. Such a change in geopolitics arguably provided an opportunity for the internationalization of negotiations through the creation of the Quartet in 2002 of which the EU is a full member. Thus, the EU High Representative Javier Solana became much more visible in the region since he first took part in the Sharm el-Sheikh Summit, following the failure of Camp David in 2000. A year later, the role of the EU increased with the presence of the EU's special envoy to the peace process, Miguel Moratinos and his aides as the only “outsiders at the Taba Hotel”. Although the EU did not oversee the negotiations directly, Moratinos interviewed both negotiation teams immediately after the talks on the basis of which he wrote an unofficial document presenting both positions on the final status issues and exposing the differences²³. Furthermore, the EU together with other Quartet members sponsored the Road Map, which it initiated in 2002 under the Danish Presidency²⁴.

Despite its historical evolution, an often depiction of the European Union's role in the Middle East Peace Process is the one of a *payer* as opposed to a *player*²⁵. As the largest donor to the Palestinian Authority (PA) since the advent of the Oslo era, the EU has been tirelessly attempting to build peace between Israel and the Palestinians through aid. However, due to the failure of the Camp David Summit and in response the break out of the Al-Aqsa intifada, it has been repeatedly suggested that rather than exerting its economic leverage through either positive or negative conditionality in order to play a bigger part in the political peace process, the EU has in fact become a subsidizer for the Israeli occupation. As such, it has arguably taken away some of the occupying power's responsibilities vis-à-vis the occupied population under international law.

²² Agha, H. and Malley, R. (2001) “Camp David: Tragedy of Errors”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 62-85

²³ Eldar Akiva, “Moratinos Document - The peace that nearly was at Taba”, *Haaretz*, 14 February 2002

²⁴ Tocci, Nathalie (2005) “The Widening Gap between Rhetoric and Reality in EU Policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, CEPS Working Document, Nr. 217/January 2005

²⁵ IPA interview, Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Chairman, PASSIA, September 2007, Jerusalem

Indeed, it is estimated that grants and loans given by the EU and its member states amounted to 3.5 billion euros during 1994-2001. Almost one third of this sum was used to support UNRWA's²⁶ work in assisting Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, while the remaining amount has been utilized to finance development projects through Palestinian non-governmental organizations, humanitarian aid as well as direct budget support of the PA²⁷. Notwithstanding the boycott of the PA since Hamas won the legislative elections in January 2006 and the imposition of economic embargo, both the European Commission and EU member states provided approximately 700 million euros in indirect aid in 2006 alone. The common criticism – Palestinian and European alike – of the EU's policy towards the conflict is that the money and resources spent on Palestinian state-making, institution-building and humanitarian aid does not translate into a more visible political role of the EU in the Middle East. In addition, many point out the fact that short-term political actions, such as the decision to boycott the Hamas government in January 2006, in fact are damaging to the EU long-term goals. While EU assistance started shifting to development projects and institutional reform, it relapsed back to humanitarian aid after the economic and political embargo was imposed. Such a tough stance however, did not have a merely economic effect; it affected people's trust in EU's good will as well as the whole process of reform, transformation and the belief in principles of democracy. A long social process of confidence building between PA officials and the EU, as well as with the community, was all of a sudden interrupted.

²⁶ UNRWA: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East.

²⁷ Dieckhoff, A. 'The European Union and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict', *Inroads Journal* No. 16, 2005

3. Poland's Policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The Middle East increasingly is becoming an important area of Poland's concern. Under communism, Poland led a pro-Arab policy. Since 1989 however, it is conducting a policy of "equal distance" as several officials stressed. This policy has not changed in spite of the different governments that have held office in the last seventeen years and Poland's accession to the European Union. Poland does not have an ambition to conduct an independent Middle East policy, but being the largest out of all New Member States, it is aware of its particular role in the European Union. The traditionally good relations with Arab countries in particular as well as the historic ties with Israel sometimes create the temptation to play a much greater role in conflict resolution. Unofficially Poland has declared several times its willingness to engage in mediations. But, as one Polish official said maintaining "equal distance" and good relations with both parties is not enough. Palestinians welcomed Polish attempts while Israel was not interested in the initiative. Israel hopes for Poland to establish a greater pro-Israeli role in EU institutions. In the eyes of Israel the European Union is perceived as supporting the Palestinian cause while Poland and the Czech Republic who are the strongest US allies among New Member States, are thus potential Israeli allies. But according to Israeli officials Poland has to learn first how to effectively operate in EU institutions and express its opinions. Poland has to be more active and work together with other New Member States, for example through the Visegrad Group. A collective voice is better heard than a single one. To sum up, the enlargement did not change democratically the EU's role in the Middle East although both sides feel they got new support for their policies. Israel feels that it has more allies among the pro-American New Member States. Arab states, including the Palestinian Authority, still remember and appreciate pro-Arab policies, which those countries used to conduct. Consequently, the Palestinians try to convince the Polish government that they have better contacts in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon than the United States and therefore better inside information on potential developments. Poland needs the Palestinians if it wants to play bigger role in the Middle East and the EU. Also, Polish officials agree with this argument:

“The Poles could influence Middle Eastern affairs through the Palestinians. The Palestinians would give us the opportunity to enter many areas. We could get through to places, where we are not necessarily perceived as partners (in the Gulf for example), in regions, where they [the Palestinians] have good commercial ties. Overall, there is a Polish presence in the region, but there is no policy. We do not take full advantage of this potential.”²⁸

Poland officially supports the Middle East Quartet’s efforts of reaching a solution, leading eventually to the creation of 2 states living in peace and security within internationally recognized borders. Thus, understandably Poland’s reaction to the Gaza takeover was in line with the EU position declaring that the “bloody coup undertaken by Hamas deserves condemnation in the strongest words”. Consequently, it was wary to declare that the resumption of any sort of dialogue with the Islamist movement would depend on its fulfillment of conditions imposed by the Quartet – renouncing terrorism, recognizing Israel and previous agreements²⁹. It thus took a stance more in line with the United States and distanced itself from Southern countries, which expressed their concern for a degree of reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah.

Furthermore, it recognized the urgency of security sector reform as well as governmental economic reforms leading to the betterment of living conditions in the Territories. It welcomed the transfer of tax revenues and the release of Palestinian prisoners calling it “a positive signal on Israel’s side”, as well as the readiness of the Arab League to cooperate with Israel, which it hopes will contribute a solution. In addition, Poland gave its full support to Tony Blair, since it believes that through his expertise in Middle Eastern politics, he will have the ability to engage the Quartet constructively in the region. Similarly, according to the official Polish stance, the Annapolis peace conference is seen as a crucial initiative for the renewal of the peace process. Poland however stressed the necessity of both Saudi Arabia and Israel to participate in the conference for it to be able to succeed. Lastly, Poland believes in the restoration of peace initiatives and broken relations between Israeli and Palestinian communities, through the reestablishment of

²⁸ IPA Interview, Polish Official, Ramallah 2007

²⁹ Departament Afryki i Bliskiego Wschodu, „Stanowisko dot. aktualnego stanu procesu pokojowego na Bliskim Wschodzie”, 30 August 2007

economic, cultural and academic cooperation, which it seeks to pursue through a trilateral Palestinian-Israeli-Polish dialogue. Do these statements go beyond rhetoric and translate into action and real policy implemented on the ground? What are the instruments deployed by Poland in order to pursue its goals?

Currently, two major components make up for Polish policy in the Middle East: its military presence and peacekeeping missions, as well as development aid, which it has been deploying since its integration into the European Union.

Military Presence

Although no external power is directly involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, any military involvement in the Middle East is relevant to a given country's policy towards it, due to the regional dynamics and the influence all crises exert on each other. There is no doubt that the war in Iraq has changed regional alliances and thus influenced the Israeli-Palestinian conflict externally. It has successfully achieved to divide not only Iraq but also other Middle Eastern states and non-state actors along the Sunni and Shiite line. In addition, according to Abdul Hadi, the images of sectarian violence have had a tremendous effect on the Palestinian society internally. The brutalization of the Palestinian street, kidnappings and acts of retaliation between members of Hamas and Fatah as seen in the Gaza Strip are a recent phenomenon, previously non-existent in a highly politicized society fighting for the common goal of statehood. How has Poland's military presence in the region affected the conflict? Has it had any effect at all?

Although, it is conventionally believed that as a strategic ally of the US in Europe, Poland's policy is solely pro-American most decision makers assert that it is a mixture of pure pragmatism and EU-driven agenda. Poland has expressed its political support to the US-led military intervention against Iraq in March 2003. This support materialized in the deployment of 2500 Polish troops, which were primarily used for the stabilization and reconstruction of the country and incorporated in the Multinational Division Center-South. Soon, the Polish contingent was made responsible for a zone consisting of 5 provinces – Babil, Karbala, Diwaniya, Najaf and Wasit – patrolling the region and

providing security training to the Iraqi army. While the security situation has been since then constantly worsening, reaching a stage that many define as “civil war” and the number of US troops has been increasing, the Polish government took the decision – along with other European actors involved - to downsize its contingent first to 1500 and as of March 2006 to 900 troops. This decision stemmed from 2 main concerns: to limit Poland’s involvement in military operations and to allow the Iraqi army to gradually take over the responsibility for security. The main reasons behind Poland’s involvement in the conflict were both political and economic. At the time of the invasion, there was a lot of hope that the military presence would result in Polish companies’ extensive participation in the reconstruction of Iraq on the one hand, and American investments in Poland accompanied by the strengthening of the political alliance on the other.

After the 2007 parliamentary elections in Poland the government was made up by the pro- European Civic Platform and the Polish Peasant Party. They both agreed that Polish troops will be withdrawn from Iraq in 2008.

There is a feeling amongst Polish officials that the sole participation in the stabilizing mission in Iraq has put the country on the Middle Eastern map as “an important player” and gained the respect of Arab governments, which “are fond of power”³⁰. The overall feeling in policy-making circles in Warsaw is that Poland’s military presence in the region is well-perceived and welcome among Arab countries because of its respect for culture and religion. Such an apparent acceptance does not however translate into better economic relations. Surprisingly, there does not seem to be much questioning of what military involvement means for the region itself and the security of its people, rather it is perceived in terms of how can Poland’s interests be ensured.

Indeed, Polish policy in the Middle East seems to be driven by its military presence in the region, either in Iraq or as part of peacekeeping mission in Lebanon and Syria. In the words of a Polish official “they are Poland’s biggest asset: the more missions, the bigger Poland’s involvement in international and EU policy towards the region. They increase its credibility as an EU member and strengthen its position”³¹. Following this line of

³⁰ IPA Interview, Polish Diplomat, August 2007

³¹ IPA Interview, Polish Official, Ministry of Defense, August 2007

reasoning and its desire to take part in shaping EU and international policy towards the Middle East, Poland strengthened its military presence as part of UNIFIL in South Lebanon after the end of the 2006 war. The Ministry's official stance is that it responded to an EU call to support a UN resolution implementing a cease-fire between the Israeli army and Hezbollah. Thus, Poland increased its troops from 180 to 500 soldiers. However, the number remains too small - the total military personnel is 13,349 – for Poland to impose its visibility, play a bigger bilateral role or mediate between Israel and Lebanon. This does not even seem to be its ambition. When asked for the reason of its involvement, Polish decision-makers assert that they complied with an EU policy of concern for Israel's security by monitoring the border and care for Lebanon's post-war reconstruction. Poland's involvement in military and peacekeeping missions seems to be primarily driven by the desire to secure its own political and economic interests as an EU member, rather than fulfilling a broader security agenda. Indeed, a military official compared Poland's participation in UNIFIL to a peacekeeping mission in Chad, where 150 Polish troops will be integrated as part of a French contingent³². On the one hand, it seems to respond to responsibilities imposed by membership rather than a particular interest in the region. On the other, it explores the benefits of such an involvement – be they economic by increasing Polish export or diplomatic by ensuring the country's visibility on the international political scene. Thus, it is primarily perceived as a pragmatic actor, rather than one, which complies with US policies.

Development Aid

It is commonly recognized that the Polish government has the potential to shape to some extent the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through bilateral relations, which it has established with both the PA and Israel. In the case of Israel they take the form of contractual relations in the areas of trade, technology, security industry or culture and academia. In the case of the Palestinians this relationship expresses itself more often than not in the form of development aid due to the absence of an independent state and degrading humanitarian conditions. Additionally, there seems to be an understanding amongst government officials that Poland should exert leverage over the conflict precisely through its development assistance, i.e. either through positive or negative conditionality.

³² IPA Interview, Polish Official, Ministry of Defense, August 2007

This suggests firstly that although there is declared even-handedness towards the conflict, a concern for balance and equality of treatment of the two parties, the general view is in line with the principles outlined in the 2003 Road Map for Peace that the PA needs to undergo changes before any agreement with Israel is reached. Secondly, the highly politicized nature of aid is a way for Poland to impose its own policies in compliance with the EU agenda. Such policy is even more visible in Poland since the 2005 elections when both president Kaczyński and the centrist Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) got into power. According to a Polish diplomat, Poland's political right is rather pro-Israeli, for obvious historical reasons on the one hand and ideology defining the style of governance on the other: "Kaczyński likes the fact that Israel has a similar vision of a strong country and 'state democracy', which puts a strong emphasis on security³³". This fondness seems to be reciprocal with Israel officially supporting Poland's participation in the UNIFIL peacekeeping mission in South Lebanon and praising its military presence in Iraq as a commitment to ensuring regional and more importantly international security³⁴.

By integrating into the EU structures, Poland had to convert from a recipient of aid into a donor country. As soon as October 2003, the Council of Ministers adopted a "Strategy for Poland's Development Cooperation" and by the end of 2004 UNDP Poland together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched the "Millennium Development Goals Time to Help Others" public awareness campaign setting out the goals for the country's Official Development Assistance (ODA). In terms of money spent on development aid, here again Poland complies with EU obligations, which expected it to amount to 0.1% of Polish GDP in 2006 and raise to 0.17 % of GDP by 2010³⁵. Apart from political, ethical, socio-economic or state security reasons for involvement in a global commitment to cooperation and development, Poland's reasons stem also from its modern history and the assistance it received in carrying out structural reforms and transformation in the 1990's. According to the official assistance strategy set out in 2003, Poland's priorities are

³³ IPA Interview, Tel Aviv , August 2007,

³⁴ „Izrael liczy na Polskę, ROZMOWA Szewach Weiss, były ambasador Izraela w Warszawie”, *Rzeczpospolita*, 11 September 2006

³⁵ UNDP Poland website, accessed at http://www.un.org.pl/rozwoj/info_informacje-prasowe.php

countries in the process of structural change especially in Eastern and Southern Europe and those, with which Poland enjoys a high degree of political, commercial and cultural ties. In addition, it is committed to assisting countries in need of humanitarian aid and activities designed to prevent deadly conflict and serving state security. Realizing both, its limited experience in ODA and resources in comparison to other donors, Poland decided to reduce its intervention to the following core areas: health, science and education, water and sanitation, protection of the environment, capacity building, supporting democratic institutions and transboundary cooperation³⁶. In addition, it decided to specialize in areas, where it could make a valuable contribution and its involvement would be considered added value. One such example are Poland's efforts in the Palestinian Territories, which concentrate on trilateral initiatives aiming to bring Palestinians and Israelis together. The Poles are trying to export their own transformation and reconciliation experience, which is why Poland has repeatedly offered its own expertise in socio-political reforms, good governance, human rights, educational reform, civil society and institution-building.

In 2007, 9 countries were identified as a priority. These include Belarus which received 7 million euros in assistance, Ukraine with 4 million euros, followed by Afghanistan (2,1 million euros), Georgia, Moldova, Tanzania and finally Angola, the Palestinian Territories and Iraq, which were allocated 500 000 euros each. Assistance was channeled both through NGO funded projects and Polish foreign missions. A separate Small Grants Fund was allocated solely to African countries. The fact that Eastern and Southern European countries were given most of the funding should come as no surprise since the decision is compliant with the 2003 official development assistance strategy. Iraq and Afghanistan also come as obvious choices due to the presence of Polish troops in those countries. The rationale for aiding the remaining countries however, is compliant with EU requirements. Angola and Tanzania have been identified as countries in need of assistance based on the new EU strategy for Africa, which was adopted at the end of 2005 and which aims to help the continent in reaching the Millennium Development Goals. The increase of Polish aid to the Palestinian Territories (from a mere 130 000 euros in 2005 to 500 000 in 2006 and 2007) was firstly a direct response to the decision

³⁶Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs „STRATEGIA POLSKIEJ WSPÓŁPRACY NA RZECZ ROZWOJU Przyjęta przez Radę Ministrów w dniu 21 października 2003 r.” Warsaw, October 2003

taken by the General Affairs and External Relations Council of the EU (GAERC) on 10 April 2006 to meet the basic needs of the Palestinian population and address the worsening humanitarian situation. Secondly, the assistance is justified by traditionally good relations between “Poland and the Palestinian people”³⁷

In the face of forgotten wars, which have taken the lives of hundreds of thousands of people as in Darfur or the Congo, one might wonder why the Palestinian Territories, where a relatively low-intensity conflict is taking place, was identified as a priority by Polish ODA. On the one hand, Poland’s involvement in the region stems from its political ambitions: any state, which has aspirations to be recognized as a player in international relations wants to be somewhat involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict for Public Diplomacy purposes. As cynical as it may sound, before bringing about real change, development aid grants visibility³⁸. On the other, there is genuine conviction among some officials working on the ground that Poland has a role to play and can bring a fresh perspective because of its “special alliance” with Israel and traditionally good relations with Arab states³⁹. The decision to establish bilateral relations with the PA first came about in 2000, but it is not until 2004 that a Polish Representative Office was established in Ramallah, due to the break out of the second intifada. Other new EU members however, such as the Czech Republic and Hungary have opened Representative offices as early as 1999 and 2000, which did not grant Poland a monopoly on relations with the PA among the Visegrad Group of states, as some would have wanted.

In 2007, Poland maintained it funded mostly projects in the realm of water and sanitation, education, health and micro-projects, most of them implemented by the Polish Humanitarian Organization in cooperation with local counterparts. In addition, it also provided direct assistance to refugees via a grant to UNRWA. Its real interest however lies in strengthening the “peace fabric” by facilitating cross-cultural dialogue between the Palestinians and the Israelis, modeled after Polish reconciliation with Ukraine and Germany. How is this involvement perceived by the beneficiaries themselves?

³⁷ Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Polski program pomocy zagranicznej udzielanej za pośrednictwem MSZ RP w roku 2007”, Warsaw, 2007

³⁸ IPA Interview, EC Official, August 2007, Jerusalem

³⁹ IPA Interview, Polish official, August 2007, Ramallah

4. The Palestinian Narrative

There seems to be consensus among the Palestinians about the role of the EU and new member states – including Poland – in the conflict. Indeed, as a recipient of European assistance, Palestine has become an example of peace building through aid rather than a result of political and natural social processes. It thus became a product of multiple and conflicting agendas of donors, with its political and economic needs being somewhat marginalized. While there is recognition that the EU aspires to be a stronger partner in the Middle East, the overall assumption is that it has become a “payer not a player”, which is unable or unwilling to translate the money it spends to achieve its goals in Israel and Palestine into real political leverage⁴⁰. An often reiterated public perception is that by spending millions of euros on an annual basis on projects aiming at improving the lives of the Palestinians the EU is effectively subsidizing the Israeli occupation, taking away Israel’s responsibility under international law.

Interviewees have often cited the destruction of EU-funded infrastructure projects by the Israeli army as such an example. The EC has most recently estimated the damage done by Israel to EU-funded projects in the Palestinian Territories to amount to 44 million euros⁴¹. These include: the destruction of the runway at Gaza International Airport, bombing of the Gaza seaport and offices of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, the building and studio of the Palestine Broadcasting Corporation during the Ramallah incursion and laboratories used for a counter-terrorism program – to quote a few⁴². At the height of the cycle of violence, during which most of these facilities were damaged (2001-2002), the then external relations commissioner Chris Patten, excluded any legal or political action against Israel claiming that the process would be extremely difficult for 2 main reasons. Firstly, the internal structure of the EU would hamper the process of compensation, since projects are not only channeled through the Commission, but also through member states. Second, upon completion a project becomes the legal property of the people it is supposed to benefit, making EU legal action almost impossible. Thus, the EU limited itself to verbal condemnation and balanced statements, best exemplified in the words of Chris Patten:

⁴⁰ IPA Interviews, PASSIA, EC Delegation in Jerusalem and the Negotiation Support Unit, August 2007

⁴¹ Cronin David, “Call to halt EU trade with Israel”, *Inter Press Service*, 4 September 2007

⁴² DFID, „Physical Damages Inflicted by IDF Attacks to EU funded Development Project”.

"While we condemn savage attacks on Israeli people without any reservation, we at the same time question whether some of the targeting of development projects [by Israeli forces] makes any conceivable sense. It is quite difficult to know how driving a bulldozer up and down the runway in Gaza will make it less likely for young men and women to strap bombs to themselves and murder people in Tel Aviv."

The Palestinians however, would have wanted the EU to take a political stance and "ask for its money back", by using the leverage it has over Israel through the EU-Israel Association Agreement guaranteeing it economic benefits. They point out the fact that such action has been taken in the past in respect to imposing taxation on settlers' products⁴³. Even though some voices within the European Parliament traditionally seen as pro-Palestinian have gone so far as to call for the suspension of that agreement at a UN conference, which took place in Brussels in September 2007 as a protest of human rights violation in the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinians are quite disillusioned. They are conscious that a consensus within an ever growing EU representing conflicting agendas would not be reached for such a decision to be imposed. Many have repeated that the EU is compromising its values and principles of respect for human rights – included in Article 2 of the Association Agreement for instance – precisely when it comes to Israel. According to Abdul Hadi "people are too shy and reluctant to challenge Israelis on anything. Not because of the Holocaust and the legacy of the Jewish Question in Europe, but because of the United States"⁴⁴. Indeed, according to the Palestinian narrative, the question of the role of the EU or new member states in the conflict seems inseparable from the overwhelming position of the US in the Middle East.

Israel's privileged relationship with the United States is all too well known. However, according to the Palestinian narrative it is not only this partnership, which drives American policy towards the Middle East and in consequence affects the conflict. It is suggested that the American agenda has been based for the last 6 years on what Abdul Hadi defines as the 5 "I's", namely Islamophobia, which developed after 9/11, Iraq, Iran, Israel and finally Intelligence⁴⁵. The United States hijacked the Quartet in order to pursue

⁴³ IPA Interview, Negotiation Support Unit, Ramallah, August 2007

⁴⁴ IPA interview, Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Chairman PASSIA, August 2007, Jerusalem

⁴⁵ IPA Interview, Mahdi Abdul Hadi, PASSIA, August 2007

its own agenda in the region, which in turn has huge repercussions on the ways in which the conflict is now perceived and thus attempted at being resolved. Whereas there was no doubt that the first Intifada (1987-93) was grounded in a struggle for statehood and national liberation, the second upheaval launched by the Palestinians after an effective failure of the Peace Process with the collapse of negotiation talks in 2000, remains misunderstood as a cycle of endless religious violence and terrorism. Palestinians themselves are partly responsible for such a perception, compromising the moral dimension of their struggle with suicide attacks against Israeli civilian population and the high islamization of their political scene. It is no coincidence that the second Intifada is also called the Al-Aqsa intifada, in reference to one of the holiest sites of Islam and as such making many believe that religion is in fact the source of the conflict. However, the discourse imposed by the United States post-9/11 has inevitably influenced the ways in which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is dealt with. By hijacking the Quartet with the 5 “I’s”, the Palestinians have been subjected to international and regional agendas and rivalries.

Perception of New Members

Overall, Palestinians welcome EU involvement in the areas of democracy, institution and capacity building, education, waste water management and the environment, technical assistance as well as its strong commitment to human rights. However, they would like humanitarian assistance and development programs to be complemented by a more prominent political role of the EU in the region. The primary reason cited for Palestinian “under-development” is not the lack of resources, entrepreneurship or a culture of aid dependency, rather a political environment and restrictions on movement, which hamper human and social development. This is clearly a dilemma of development under occupation.

As mentioned above, Palestinians would like the EU to use its economic and technological partnership with Israel as a way of pressuring the latter to conform to international humanitarian law and convince it to go back to genuine final status talks. They point out the fact that settlements have literally doubled in size during the era of the

Oslo peace process and that despite its illegality the wall in the West Bank is continuously being built. In addition, the current restriction apparatus in the West Bank and Gaza prevents the development of the Palestinian economy: there are currently 532 roadblocks in the West Bank alone, by which Israel is violating the Agreement on Movement and Access brokered by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, European High Representative Javier Solana and the previous Quartet Representative James Wolfensohn and signed between Israel and the PA in 2005⁴⁶. Due to the damaging effects that the status quo has on the Palestinian Territories' economic situation as well as on its long-term national aspirations, negotiations are a matter of highest urgency to the Palestinians. Arguably, it is the opposite for Israel. In the view of Palestinian officials, Israel's strategic interests lie in fuelling a low-intensity conflict and thus having the opportunity to create "irreversible facts on the ground".⁴⁷

Until recently, Palestinian officials had virtually no interest in new EU member states. Given their history and affiliation with the Soviet bloc during the Cold war, Eastern European countries were for a long time taken for granted as traditionally pro-Arab and pro-Palestinian. The legacy of business cooperation as well as numerous academic scholarships and traineeships have long benefited Poland, in particular, a good reputation among Palestinians. In addition, its lack of colonial past is perceived as an asset in a region, which still struggles with the effects of postcolonialism. As a country, which fought for freedom itself and experienced structural transformation, Poland comes to the Middle East without the legacy of imperialism ascribed to European powers such as the UK, France or Spain, which renders its involvement less problematic in the eyes of Islamist groups. Paradoxically, Poland's military presence in Iraq has given it relative visibility, but has not put it on the map of Islamist organizations fighting against a renewed imperialism. As for Palestinian negotiators concentrating their efforts on winning over the Americans along with key European states such as France, UK and Germany, new EU members became of interest once they explicitly started a pro-

⁴⁶ OCHA Occupied Palestinian Territory official website

⁴⁷ On the other hand many interviewed Palestinians have said that time works in their favour. A demographic battle is one of few they can win vs. Israel. They go on to say that the West Bank is a ticking time bomb and that Arabs are renowned for their patience and ability to stare an opponent down. This view however is more predominant among Islamist movements and their supporters as opposed to secular circles.

American foreign policy. As such, there is concern that these countries will shift EU policy towards Israel. Officials in the Negotiations Affairs Department have asserted that they are now trying to target these countries through diplomatic meetings with representatives' offices in Ramallah as well as advocacy tools such as briefings and presentations. In addition, there is eagerness to travel to new EU member states, especially to countries like Poland, which many recognize as an important player due to the special relationship it enjoys with Israel.

Poland's trilateral initiative and people-to-people approach aimed at bringing Palestinians and Israelis together based on Polish post-war reconciliation experience with the Ukraine and Germany is well-perceived among secular academics, Fatah and PLO officials. It is however doubtful that the same goes for Hamas sympathizers. A recent article in "The Economist" about joint Israeli-Palestinian projects argues that even though these types of initiatives are still popular among philanthropists, donors are slowly shifting their approach towards projects generating internal change in perceptions rather than cross-cultural dialogue. Many Palestinians tirelessly repeat that reconciliation is the last stage of a war to peace transition and cannot come before the end of occupation and a peace agreement. They see the solution more in terms of justice first, then reconciliation. While Polish officials assert that development aid should be Poland's main tool for implementing its Middle Eastern policy, increasingly more Palestinian and European NGO workers argue that the region does not need more money or projects, rather the creation of a political environment, which would naturally favor human development and peace.

In addition, it seems that the Palestinian strategy towards new EU member states is solely based on the premise that the more voices the better. As the weaker party, the PA cannot refuse help and when asked, it naturally welcomes any initiative stemming from new EU members – be it developmental or political. Palestinians hope to use this involvement towards achieving their strategic goal of statehood, by first presenting the facts on the ground to the countries at stake in the hope that the focus of EU policies will shift towards Israel. However, the PA's interest in new EU member states does not necessarily

seem to be part of a well-thought out strategy. They are perceived more in terms of numbers that can sway the EU balance on either side.

In addition, there is doubt among Palestinians whether new EU member states fully understand regional dynamics and agendas as well as the interconnected nature of Middle Eastern conflicts. Understandably, countries with a bigger percentage of Muslim citizens are more interested in regional dynamics, since they understand the ways in which the Palestinian issue is being used by Islamist movements such as Al-Qaida. Although Palestinian officials themselves might not like to admit it, it is often suggested that in crucial times, both help and influence will be sought within key EU member states such as the UK, Germany, France and Spain and more importantly in Washington. In the words of an EU official, “the Arab world enjoys a kind of love – hate relationship” with the United States, admiring aspects of its lifestyle, but hating the fact that it does not play the role of an honest broker in the region, despite its potential to do so⁴⁸. Because of their lack of real power as individual states, new EU members, if at all, are conceived in terms of pro-Palestinian PR. In terms of direct negotiations, the PA favors a greater involvement of the EU, but as a unified impartial body, translating its values grounded in international humanitarian law into policy as opposed to 27 separate and contradictory peace initiatives.

5. The Israeli Narrative and Perception of Poland

The 2004 EU enlargement was seen in Israel as a positive sign towards a more balanced EU Middle East policy. New Member States are perceived as pro-American and thus expected to support the Israeli position. Poland’s integration in particular was welcome in Israel with great enthusiasm. Through the cooperation with new member states, perceived as more pro-American and pro-Israeli, Israel is achieving more credibility within the EU, which traditionally did not trust its judgment on Middle Eastern policies⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ IPA Interview, ECTAO, Jerusalem, August 2007

⁴⁹ IPA Interview, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jerusalem, August 2007

While Poland has been trying to maintain a balanced position towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, accepting on the one hand the non-binding UN General Assembly Resolution pressuring the Jewish state to adopt the 2004 International Court of Justice advisory ruling and tear down the Wall in the West Bank, and strongly condemning Palestinian terrorism on the other, it is widely perceived among both EU and Israeli officials to be pro-Israeli. In recent years, Israeli diplomats in Warsaw have repeatedly called Poland their “best friend” and “ambassador in the European Union”⁵⁰. Since the enlargement all Polish governments have led the same policy towards Israel, including the most recent coalition between the rightist “Law and Justice” with populist parties, deemed to be anti-Semitic. There seems to be a consensus on policy towards Israel, which has not been revisited even at critical times such as the 2006 Lebanon war or Gaza incursion.

Given its history and often uneasy Polish-Jewish relations, Poland is very sympathetic to Israel’s situation. Also for Israel Poland is a very special country. As one interviewee in Israel said:

“Poland is an integral part of World War II history. People do not have the same attitude towards Polish matters as they would towards French affairs for example. Poland is still a part of Jewish history, a part of the Holocaust. The attitude towards Poland [in Israel] is very complicated. It is completely different than the one people would have towards the Czech Republic. It is completely different than towards any other country, except obviously Germany, but this does not count. People think of New Member States such as Czech, Romania or Hungary as of countries, where Jews used to live, and where until today there might still be a Jewish community. The attitude towards Poland is more emotional, more historic and more complex. Something else is expected out of Poland, not because Poland is guilty of anything, but because we shared a common history for a few centuries. This creates some sort of obligation”⁵¹

Poland shows its support to Israel through many symbolic gestures such as the often quoted museum of History of Polish Jews funded by the government and the municipality of Warsaw, special daily broadcasting in Hebrew on public radio or cultural events aiming to bring the two nations closer together. Indeed, the Polish government has allocated a special fund to the Adam Mickiewicz Cultural Institute to organize a series of

⁵⁰“ Szewach Weiss, Rozmowa”, *Rzeczpospolita*, 11 September 2006

⁵¹ IPA interview, Israeli journalist, Tel Aviv 2007

different events in the next two years under the theme “Polish season in Israel”. According to an Israeli official:

“Israel is special to Poland and there is more understanding for Israel in the country than anywhere else in the world, due to our shared histories. This grants Israel a particular position in Poland’s foreign policy to such an extent that policy towards Israel becomes part of Poland’s internal politics”⁵².

Some voices in Israel go so far as to say that “there is a new Poland today”, one which is “striving to revive the chapter of [its] shared life with the Jews” and “erase the eras of Nazism and communism”, a Poland, aspiring to overshadow its ‘light anti-Semitism’ by “a wave of philo-Semitism”⁵³. Quoting Israeli officials, Primor from Haaretz argues that “if there is a government in Europe that Israel relies on at times of trouble, it is the Polish one and that, despite the problematic elements in it”, referring to anti-Semitic statements of members of the Polish government such as the Minister of Education Roman Giertych or MEP Maciej Giertych, whose publication of an anti-Semitic pamphlet “Civilization at War in Europe” caused a much talked about scandal in Brussels. Overall, Israel perceives bilateral relations with Poland as strategic.

Such statements are indeed proven to be true not only in the realm of discourse and rhetoric, but also on the political level. After the dramatic and highly controversial Lebanon war in 2006, Poland’s president Lech Kaczyński was the first leader of a big, European country to come to Israel on an official visit. This was received in Israel as a symbolic gesture of Poland’s support at a time many criticized Tel Aviv for the use of excessive and disproportionate force against the Lebanese civilian population. While in the region, the President was careful to maintain balance and treat both conflicted parties equally, by remaining in the safety of broad declarations. This was evident during Kaczyński’s visit to Ramallah and meeting with President Abbas on the last day of his visit, when he stated that “Poland can have good relations with Israel and the PA” and that while Israel is a friend of Poland, it can still sympathize with Palestinians. Political support however does not necessary translate into a greater involvement on the ground,

⁵² IPA Interview, Israeli diplomat, Warsaw, August 2007

⁵³ Primor, Adar, „There is a New Poland”, *Haaretz*, 15 June 2007

which neither party seems to be interested in. During his visit, Kaczyński was wary to deny any speculations of Poland brokering a prisoners' swap between Hamas and the Israeli government stating that "there are other ways of leading this type of negotiations and Poland does not intend to fulfill a role, which can be done by a different party"⁵⁴.

Such statements are welcome in Israel, which appears to be more interested in declaratory diplomacy and official Polish positions than its involvement as an individual actor⁵⁵. Israel did not respond positively to offers coming from Warsaw in 2002-2003 to organize a peace conference in Poland. The PA expressed enthusiasm, most probably due to reasons explained above: as the weaker party, it sees negotiations and peace as a matter of highest urgency and cannot afford to reject help. Israel, however, was more pragmatic and rejected the idea on the premise that it did not wield added value. It questioned Polish expertise in conflict resolution and its financial resources to be able to organize such an event. As such, the Israeli rationale echoes the Palestinian strategy. While, both the PA and Israel realize the potential of individual EU member states, or different blocs of countries to direct the course of European policies, they both seem to agree that the fewer players involved in direct negotiations, the better, as the potential to influence their outcome is higher. According to Israeli officials, Poland's role can be 'useful' solely as an EU member state influencing Council Conclusions and making sure that the pro-Palestinian narrative, promoted mostly by Southern⁵⁶ and Scandinavian countries – such as Sweden and Finland - does not prevail. In other words, Israel is interested in maintaining the status quo. Poland has been precisely responding to Israeli expectations and as such gained the recognition of "Israel's ambassador in the EU". Indeed, it has been successful in blocking Council Conclusions regarding the humanitarian situation in Gaza put forth by Portugal, since it perceived the language used as too pro-Palestinian⁵⁷. In addition, Israeli officials believe that Poland can represent best their position regarding Iran's nuclear program and have consequently concentrated their diplomatic efforts on targeting Warsaw.

⁵⁴ Wroński Paweł, "Lech Kaczyński w Autonomii Palestyńskiej", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 14 September 2006

⁵⁵ IPA Interview, Polish official, Tel Aviv, August 2007

⁵⁶ Spain is often quoted as the most Pro-Palestinian state within the EU.

⁵⁷ IPA Interview, Polish official, Warsaw, August 2007

Another such example is the role that Polish MEP's play in promoting a "balanced policy" towards the conflict. Indeed, some of them opposed a United Nations International Civil Society Conference on the on-going occupation of the West Bank and Gaza held at the European Parliament at the end of August. Polish MEP's belonging to different parties have taken a strong stance against the conference and in fact supported Israel's efforts to boycott it based on the premise that by focusing on Israeli restrictive measures towards the civilian population, its program was completely anti-Israeli and thus counter-productive. Asked for the reasons why he would not take part in the conference, MEP Bronisław Geremek argued that the conference was biased and did not take into consideration the arguments of the other side, and as such was inviting it to organize a counter conference equally one-sided. In his and other Polish MEP's view, the European Parliament should be a platform for dialogue working towards reaching a Middle Eastern settlement, rather than a place of confrontation. Additionally, according to Geremek, MEP's should try to change the Parliament's image of being completely pro-Palestinian. Hence, Poland and new EU member states are in favor of maintaining a balanced policy towards the conflict: "Polish MEP's have demonstrated in the past that they also understand Israeli arguments. Poles as well as MEP's from other new member states are very active in making sure that EU policy towards the Middle East is evenhanded. Neither pro-Palestinian, nor pro-Israeli"⁵⁸.

Poland, as well as other new EU members can indeed afford to take such a stance, because it does not have a colonial past and as a result no moral debt towards the Arab world. As discussed above the lack of past involvement of new EU member states in the region is also perceived as an asset by the Palestinians, which see it as an opportunity for them to become honest brokers in the eyes of a formerly subjugated Muslim world. For the Israelis, however, it means an ability to "shake off the heritage of communism and the Eastern bloc's traditional pro-Arab policies"⁵⁹. The question that one should ask at this point is whether in this case Israel wishes that Poland becomes a bigger player in the conflict? Does it want Poland to become anything more than "its ambassador in the EU"?

⁵⁸ Geremek Bronisław Interview, „W Unii klimat sprzyja Palestyńczykom”, *Rzeczpospolita*, August 2007

⁵⁹ Primor, Adar, „There is a New Poland”, *Haaretz*, 15 June 2007

6. Conclusion: Potential for Bigger Involvement?

All stake holders in Middle East perceive the change of EU's role in the region. Above all, many interviewees stressed that the EU presents a more neutral and objective stance. Israeli citizens have emphasized its anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian attitude in the past, but currently both sides highlight the EU's intention to keep a policy of "equal distance". The EU has also initiated programmes of more efficient monitoring of EU funds. It additionally undertook a struggle against corruption. For many years indeed, resources were spent to support corrupt organizations and their leaders. The EU has also started to lead a more tangible policy towards the Middle East, which is not easy, since the EU does not have a common foreign policy until today. In the words of one Israeli interviewee:

"The European Union cannot be a strong player, because it does not know how to act on the basis of carrots and sticks. It only gives carrots, but cannot raise the stick and that's why no one takes it seriously. Now, it has finally achieved to raise the stick, even regarding such a minor issue, like the electricity plant, which they will stop funding [in Gaza]. The European Union is now taking very serious steps to halt assistance, which was not properly controlled before".⁶⁰

While observing these changes in the EU stance, many Palestinian interviewees expect it to take other steps, in terms of political action. They would like it to take a more concrete position regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to see it exert influence on Israel.

"In order for a peace settlement to be reached, both sides will have to accept very painful and large concessions. The influence of the EU can help both nations in making these concessions less painful and accepted with a little less disenchantment. Money can buy peace to a certain extent if the European Union said: if an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement is reached, the EU will consider Israel's membership in the EU. This would be very important for future talks about peace. Whether Israel wants to be part of the EU or not, is not even the question at this point, what is important is to know that the EU is considering this as an important issue."⁶¹

In order to become a "player not a payer" the EU needs to act as a unified body, taking short-term political decisions, which would not undermine its long-term political goals. As noted by Martti Ahtisaari and Joschka Fischer "Europeans are held back by the lack of an effective common strategy" towards the different conflicts in the region from

⁶⁰ IPA interview, Israeli journalist, Tel Aviv 2007

⁶¹ Ibidem

Israel/Palestine to Iraq and Afghanistan. This was best exemplified by the 2006 Lebanon crisis, where “no fewer than 25 European ministers - each from a different country - traveled to Beirut, delivering mixed messages”⁶². EU officials in the field seem to agree that both Palestinians and Israelis are confused by a multitude of different initiatives, starting by those promoted by individual member states, the European commissioner for external relations and neighbourhood policy, the EU Special Envoy to the Middle East and finally the EU High Representative Javier Solana. As a divided and misleading body, the EU is naturally perceived as less efficient and harder to deal with than the United States for instance. Paradoxically, as the largest donor to the PA and as such arguably “a major subsidiary for the Israeli occupation” it becomes marginalized as a political player. In order to reverse such a perception, the EU should work towards creating a political agenda and climate, which would enable negotiations and a genuine peace process. Arguably, the last thing that the Middle East needs is a new peace initiative. In terms of diplomacy, Poland, as well as other new EU member states should concentrate their diplomatic efforts towards supporting a common EU strategy towards the region in order to create a real window of opportunity for final status negotiations. Only when speaking in one voice can the EU create incentives for peace, involve key regional actors in the process or lead to a reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, a pre-condition for a comprehensive agreement.

As one EC official noted, “help is always welcome” in brokering peace, but one needs to think about its added value. Does Poland or any other new EU member state have the capacity to bring about change and a fresh perspective to the conflict, which would force both parties to sit at the negotiating table? All stakeholders – whether it is Israel, the Palestinians, or new EU members - realize that the strength of an EU policy lies in its unified position. Due to competition among member states seeking exposure and pursuing their own agendas through development aid, there is a cacophony of initiatives leading to contradicting results. There is consensus among Polish officials that Poland should attempt to shape the conflict through its assistance program. It is however doubtful that by spending 0.5 million euros in 2006 – out of a total of 700 million euros spent by the EU – it will be able to achieve its long-term goals. Even bigger donors such

⁶² Martti Ahtisaari and Joschka Fischer, “Europe needs to assert itself in the world”, *Financial Times* 1 October 2007

as France, the UK or Spain with long established ODA programs have limited influence if they act alone. Israel is well aware of the fact that the United States has more leverage over all the different players than any EU member state. So are the Palestinians. Both parties in the conflict seem to be solely interested in a greater role of a given country for Public Diplomacy purposes, in order to change other members' positions and sway the overall balance in their favor. Similarly, while seeking to secure its own interests in the region, Poland seems to be more interested in reaching consensus within the EU rather than leading a policy of its own. Therefore, there seems to be agreement that there is no room for any new or old EU member to play a bigger bilateral role.

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