

## OBSTACLES TO PEACE BETWEEN ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

**Pol Bargués**, Senior Research Fellow, CIDOB  
**Moussa Bourekba**, Research Fellow, CIDOB

*After four months of war in Gaza, the European Union, or at least its High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, seems determined to talk about peace. Borrell is even saying that the international community will have to “impose” it. But in such an asymmetrical conflict, how can peace be imagined?*

# 790

FEBRUARY  
2024

The Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023 in which more than 1,100 Israelis, mostly civilians, were killed and some 240 people were taken hostage, unleashed a devastating war with a direct impact on regional stability. The Israeli response has resulted in the deaths of more than **more than 30,000 Palestinians**, the majority of them women and children, and the forced displacement of more than one and a half million Palestinians who are living in subhuman conditions without shelter, food, or water, and still threatened by Israeli army bombing attacks.

With growing international pressure for a ceasefire in Gaza, the government of Benjamin Netanyahu is still persisting in its military campaign in pursuance of its goals: eradication of Hamas, freeing the hostages, and ensuring that Gaza will never again pose a threat to Israel. However, increasing numbers of international and regional actors are beginning to talk about peace. For the European Union and the international community, this peace entails the two-state solution, which goes back to the original formula put forth by the United Nations in 1947.

The EU's advocacy of the two-state solution is nothing new. What has changed is that since the beginning of the year, EU institutions have tried to **resume** a certain impartiality in the conflict and are beginning to speak out in favour of peace. First, in Lisbon, the High Representative, Josep Borrell, **stated**: “Peace will only be achieved in a lasting manner if the international community gets involved intensely to achieve it and imposes a solution”. Later, at the University of Valladolid, in his speech on being invested with an Honorary Doctorate, the head of EU diplomacy **pointed out** that Israel has financed Hamas with the aim of weakening the Palestinian National Authority.

Even more ambitiously, at the end of January, **Borrell** presented to the foreign ministers of the EU 27 and representatives from Israel and the Arab countries a 10-point plan for the creation of two states. This plan

envisages a “Preparatory Peace Conference” and talks until it is possible for the parties to agree on a solution. Always wary of idealism, Borrell did not speak of “peace” but of “solutions”: “We have to stop talking about the ‘peace’ process and start talking more concretely about the ‘two-state solution’ process”.

Despite international consensus on the formula presented by the United Nations, and Borrell’s determination to move closer to the inevitable horizon of peace, there are obstacles that will be difficult to overcome.

*Despite its economic power, the European Union–Israel’s main trading partner and largest provider of foreign aid to the Palestinians–has been unable to make any progress towards achieving peace between the two sides. The initial reluctance of Brussels, like Washington, to pressure Israel to end its military campaign has shredded EU credibility in Palestine and a good part of the Middle East.*

First, how could peace that entails the creation of a Palestinian state be “imposed” when Israel vehemently opposes this? The Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu recently **declared** that in any future arrangement, “the state of Israel has to control the entire area from the river to the sea”. Heavy external pressure would be needed to convince the Israeli government, and this seems impossible in view of the unconditional support that it has had–and **continues to have**–from Washington, regardless of the war crimes the Israeli army is committing. As yet, there is no sign that either Moscow or Beijing intends to be involved in any peace initiative. Key regional stakeholders like Egypt, Turkey, and the Gulf states are concentrating all their diplomatic efforts on achieving a ceasefire in Gaza. As long as the Gaza Strip is being bombed and **regionalisation** of the conflict continues, the Arab countries **see as unrealistic** any peace-making effort that does not start with achieving an end to the war, and that does not include official recognition of a Palestinian state.

Despite its economic power, the European Union–Israel’s main trading partner and largest provider of foreign aid to the Palestinians–has been unable to make any progress towards achieving peace between the two sides. The initial reluctance of Brussels, like Washington, to pressure Israel to end its military campaign has **“shredded” EU credibility** in Palestine and a good part of the Middle East. However, in order to redress this situation, Brussels could promote EU-wide recognition of a Palestinian state in accordance with the 1999 **Berlin Declaration**, which stated its readiness to consider this “in due course”.

The second stumbling block builds upon the question: who would sign a peace agreement? Even if peace could be imposed from the outside, the Israeli and Palestinian stakeholders have diametrically opposed positions. The Israeli government wants total control of all territories it occupies, including Gaza, and rather than any intention to put an end to colonisation, it aims to keep encouraging it. The Palestinian National Authority (PNA) opposes any kind of solution that does not include an end to the occupation and creation of a Palestinian state with the 1967 borders. Notwithstanding the PNA's **crisis of diminished legitimacy**, Palestinians do agree that **ending the Israeli occupation is the first step** towards the creation of a Palestinian state.

It is estimated that more than 700,000 Jewish settlers are living illegally in occupied Palestinian territories. Moreover, since 7 October, eviction of Palestinians from their homes and colonisation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem have intensified with Israeli government and military support, as expanding the illegal settlements was already a priority of the Netanyahu government. It is a gradual but implacable strategy. In the words of the **BBC**, one day a motorhome moves in, the next a few houses are built, and then an urban centre is established. In these circumstances, any proposal for negotiation that does not envisage an end to the occupation is, perforce, doomed to failure.

An even thornier matter is the role of Hamas in future negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. This militant Palestinian group which committed the atrocities of 7 October is a stakeholder that Israel wishes to eradicate and that the United States and the European Union have labelled as a terrorist group. Hence the dilemma is the following: on the one hand, any attempt at negotiation that includes Hamas will be used by Israel as an argument not to engage and, on the other hand, excluding Hamas—which is supported by part of the population of Gaza and, **in growing numbers**, by the population in the West Bank—will only increase the division within the Palestinian leadership.

Talking about peace is as necessary as it is easy to see an infinite number of obstacles. Imposing peace would seem unviable without a more powerful and more credible Europe, without a more impartial United States, and without other legitimate stakeholders who are able to bring Israeli and Palestinian positions closer together. In such a lopsided conflict, the most likely scenario is that Israel will keep rejecting any solution that involves the creation of a Palestinian state, that Hamas will **survive** the current war and the international community will continue to back the two-state solution without taking any real measures to end the occupation.