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When it comes to Palestine the EU's grasp still exceeds its reach
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In a recent letter to Catherine Ashton, the EU's foreign policy chief, nineteen former senior politicians and statesmen from across Europe called on the EU to increase its role in finding a solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. In particular, these former prime ministers, foreign ministers and senior EU officials, all members of the European Eminent Persons Group on the Middle East Peace Process, were adamant that the EU must "play a political and not just a funding role" in the conflict in response to the past failure of America and the international community to deliver peace.

The context for this was the recent resignation of Salam Fayyad from his post as Prime Minister of Palestine. This news, once more, placed the deadlock in Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations in the spotlight. It also underlined the tensions within the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority (PA), and the ongoing, and perhaps insurmountable, differences between Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

No less importantly, the timing of Fayyad's resignation illuminated the Obama administration's limited influence over Palestinian leaders. Following the announcement it was widely reported that the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, had tried, and failed, to pressure and persuade Fayyad and the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, to call off the resignation.

We've been here many times before. In May 1973, for example, a diverse group of parliamentarians, academics, churchmen and writers from across Europe published an open letter to President Nixon claiming that Europe, not to mention the US, had 'suffered because of the subordination of American policy in the Middle East to Israeli interests'. In January 1998, in a reverse scenario, the European Commission published its own letter that expressed its 'determination to play a full political role in terms of promoting a comprehensive, just and lasting peace'. In particular, it called for EU governments and the EU special envoy to the Middle East to participate 'alongside' US officials in order to assist in political negotiations and to increase the EU role in coordinating donor funds as it was 'dwarfing the efforts of all other donors'.

On neither occasion did such protestations do anything to open the way for Europe to challenge Washington's status as the lead external political player in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Nor is it realistic for the knowledgeable and eminent authors of this recent letter to Ashton to expect that things will change going forward. This is especially the case for those signatories who have been directly engaged in mediating the conflict on behalf of Europe in the past, notably Benita Ferrero-Waldner, Miguel Moratinos, Javier Solana, and Hans van den Brock.

They should know better than most that for Europe to successfully undertake what they propose would require Israel to abandon its profound opposition to a substantive E.U. political role. It would also require the Palestinians to start believing in the ability of Europeans (in an official or unofficial capacity) to do more than make rousing declarations about the need for peace.

But most of all it would require the E.U. to bring to the table a unity of purpose in deed as well as word that has been absent for much of its past involvement in the Palestine question. Europe's leaders may claim that they are united in their desire to become Middle East peacemakers, and over the last decade there has been growing consensus over what a common policy for joint and effective European action in the Middle East might constitute. But colonial baggage, local jealousies and domestic political considerations still play too much of a role.

So does the tendency of Europeans to use the Palestine issue in the service of their own agendas.

This began when French president Charles de Gaulle used the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 as an excuse to realign French policy in the Middle East in favour of the Arabs, something he did without consulting his European partners. His motive was clear – to

regain la gloire of France in a crucial region and to strengthen his vision of a l'Europe des Patries, which rejected both European supra-nationalism and Atlanticism in favour of a French-dominated Europe of nation states linked by trade.

De Gaulle's vision was anathema to the E.U.'s founding fathers, whose ultimate aim was the political unification of Europe. Men like Jean Monnet, Walter Hallstein and Robert Schuman intended to create a new centre of power in the world capable of developing and implementing its own policies independent of the U.S., the Soviet Union or any other country or bloc.

This was a slow and difficult process and, as Schuman explained, "Europe will not be built all at once, or as a single whole: it will be built by concrete achievements, which first create de facto solidarity."

Every major European foreign policy innovation since de Gaulle's departure from office in 1969 has been defined by the E.U.'s attempt to get into the business of Middle East peacemaking as a way of creating this "solidarity"; required to establish Europe as a global political force as well as an economic power.

With the exception of Margaret Thatcher, most leaders have shared this theoretical vision of the European political idea. But in practice, almost all have displayed de Gaulle's rather more shrewd tactics of using the Israel-Palestine conflict as an opportunity to pursue their own ambitions and national interests.

British prime ministers have tended to view the Palestine issue first and foremost as a function of transatlantic relations. Edward Heath used the global crisis that followed the 1973 Arab-Israeli war as an opportunity to consolidate his pro-European credentials and to move away from the "special relationship" with the US.

Three decades later, Tony Blair expended much of his political capital after 9/11 trying to bridge the profound gap between the E.U. and the U.S. on Palestine. Blair saw this as key to rebuilding transatlantic ties and reducing resentment in Europe after the invasion of Iraq.

Prior to losing the French presidency, Nicolas Sarkozy sought to capitalize on the impasse in the peace process to increase France's influence in the Middle East and his own personal fortunes his own political fortunes at home in the run up to the presidential elections.

In doing so, Sarkozy, in words that are echoed almost verbatim in the recent letter to Ashton, also very publicly announced that after a decade of US failure to bring peace, the EU could no longer act as "spectators" and could no longer "contribute money and then be outside the political process."

Sarkozy was drawing attention to the growing frustration of European policymakers over the EU's role as a banker to the peace process and little more. He was also continuing a French tradition of using the Palestine issue as a vehicle for the consolidation of Paris's status as both the loudest advocate of a joint E.U. foreign policy and the E.U.'s leading independent actor in the Middle East.

The proposals included in the recent letter to Ashton are well intentioned and sensible. But they do not address a fundamental reason as to why the EU has failed over successive decades. Until this internal failing is addressed and acted upon it is unlikely that the E.U. will achieve the political influence in the Israel-Palestine conflict commensurate with its economic and donor role.

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