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2017 marked the 50th anniversary of the 1967 war and of Israel's occupation of what the European Union (EU) considers, in accordance with international law, to be Palestinian and Syrian territories. Almost as long is the involvement of the EU in the conflict, beginning with the formation of the European Political Cooperation (EPC) agreement in 1970.[1] This makes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict one of the longest, sustained cases of active EU involvement in world politics. In the EU's 2003 security strategy, resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was defined as a 'a strategic priority for Europe' and one of the keys for 'dealing with other problems in the Middle East.'[2]

During the first two decades of its involvement in the conflict, the EC/EU's role was mainly rhetorical, but it was successful in legitimizing the Palestinians and the PLO as keys to any future peace, developments that early on pointed to an important normative role for the EC/EU in the conflict.[3] After the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993–95, the EU became the main financier of the peace process, often referred to as a 'payer' but not a 'player' in the academic literature.[4] The Palestinian state-building process, now in its third decade, always has been a gamble for the EU. If it pays off and a Palestinian state eventually is established, the EU will be widely credited for its persistent support for the Palestinian Authority (PA). However, if no state is

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[1] Joel Peters (2000) Europe and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process: The Declaration of the European Council of Berlin and Beyond, in Sven Behrendt & Christian-Peter Hanelt (eds) *Bound to Cooperate: Europe and the Middle East* (Gütersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann), p. 154.
[2] European Security Strategy (2003) *A Secure Europe in a Better World*. Available at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/eeas/security-defence/european-security-strategy?lang=en, accessed September 15, 2017.
[3] Anders Persson (2015) *The EU and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1971–2013: In Search of a Just Peace* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books), p. 148.
[4] See, for example, Dimitris Bouris (2014) *The European Union and Occupied Palestinian Territories: State-building Without a State* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge), p. 71.

established, the EU instead will be accused of having pursued a misguided state-building strategy, directly or indirectly supporting the occupation, instead of Palestinian independence.

As a negotiated two-state solution with a Palestinian state alongside Israel seems less likely to materialize in 2018 than at any point since the Oslo peace process began, it is not really clear what the EU role is in the conflict, or what it will be in the future. What is obvious, however, is that the crucial questions for the EU in the conflict for the foreseeable future are: How much it really wants a two-state solution; and what it is prepared to do in terms of carrots and sticks to help achieve it? Since 2012, there have been increasing signs that the EU is ready to use its contractual agreements with Israel as sticks rather than carrots. Nevertheless, the fact that the EU members could not present a united position, neither on the 2011 or the 2012 Palestinian bids for statehood in the UN, nor on the emerging differentiation strategy, raises the questions that have plagued the EU's foreign policy since its inception, namely, what will or capability the EU really has to help implement peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

The arguments made

The purpose of this special issue has been to bring together the leading voices in the field of EU-Israel/Palestine relations to reflect on the relations between the EU and the two parties since 1967. Since it is impossible for one paradigm or theory to accurately account for the past 50 years of EC/EU involvement in the conflict, three broad arguments instead will encapsulate the articles in this special issue:

1) Europe has played distinct and unique roles in the conflict

Europe and the EU have played unique roles in the conflict, but the conflict also has played unique roles for the EU's foreign policy, as Anders Persson demonstrates in 'How, when and why did the way the EU speaks about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict change?'

From the colonial era to the present, European countries, and later the EU, have played many different roles in the conflict, even if these often have been overshadowed by American involvement in the conflict since the 1956 Suez Crisis. Yet, the EU is, both when it comes to trade with Israel and aid to the Palestinians, more important than the US. However, these very real sources of leverage have rarely, with only a few minor exceptions, been translated into diplomatic influence on the peace process, largely because the EU has been unable or unwilling to do so. Besides the EU's material power, the EU also in the academic literature is widely viewed as having non-material, normative power in the conflict, as Ian Manners argues in his contribution, 'Theorizing Normative Power in European Union-Israeli-Palestinian Relations'[5] There is, nonetheless, no consensus in the EU literature as to how important this normative power has been in the conflict. Many analysts have argued that the EC/EU and individual European countries played important normative roles in legitimizing the PLO and its leader Yasser Arafat before the Oslo Accords were signed, while others

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[5] See also Ian Manners (2002) Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms, *Journal of Common Market Studies,* 40(2), pp. 235–258.

have argued that there is little evidence of what the academic literature calls 'Normative Power Europe' in the conflict.[6]

2) Europe, in particular the EU, is part of the conflict

Its long involvement in the conflict has made Europe, in particular the EU, a part of the conflict. This is clearly visible in the article by Michelle Pace and Annika Bergman Rosamond, 'Political legitimacy and celebrity politicians: Tony Blair as Middle East envoy 2007–2015', which analyzes Blair's role as Middle East envoy. During the 1990s, third party involvement was widely seen as necessary and beneficial to the Oslo peace process, which was meant to be a temporary, interim period, before a final peace agreement was reached. But the longer this process has lasted, the more it has been questioned. European support for the PA and the peace process now more and more is perceived, as Daniela Huber ('The EU and 50 Years of Occupation: Resistance or Compliance to Normalization?') and Alaa Tartir ('The Limits of Securitized Peace: The EU's Sponsorship of Palestinian Authoritarianism') discuss in their contributions, as helping Israel to uphold its illegal occupation rather than helping the Palestinians achieve sovereignty. Other very clear examples of how the EU is part of the conflict are the seemingly growing reports by leading human rights organizations that document European complicity in both Israeli and Palestinian human rights abuses.[7]

3) The EU is part of the conflict's changing dynamic

From the indefinite occupation to the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement, to the many new alliances in the region, Europe and the EU are intrinsic parts of the conflict's changing dynamic. As Sharon Pardo and Neve Gordon demonstrate in 'Euroscepticism as an Instrument of Foreign Policy,' Israel's new strategic alliance with Greece, its closer ties with the Visegrad Four group (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary) and far-right governments and parties in Europe are clear examples of this changing dynamic. The Palestinians, for their part, have had difficulties in finding allies among the states of Europe, but wider Palestinian social movements like the BDS have found support among progressive, left-wing groups, both in Europe and the United States.

The way forward

What the different articles in this special issue all together conclude is that the EU actually has been heavily involved in the conflict over the past 50 years—from hundreds of declarations, to building the institutional foundations of a future Palestinian

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[6] See, for example, Sven Biscop (2003) *Euro-Mediterranean Security* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing Co.), p. 65; and Sharon Pardo (2015) *Normative Power Europe Meets Israel* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books), p. 99.

[7] For example Human Rights Watch (2012) *Palestinian Authority: Hold Police Accountable for Ramallah Beatings.* Available at: http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/08/2 7/palestinian-authority-hold-policeaccountable-ramallah-beatings, accessed September 15, 2017; and Amnesty (2009) *Press Release: Israel Restricts Water Availability In West Bank and Gaza.* Available at: http://www.amnesty.eu/en/news/press-releases/eu/human-rights-in-the-eu/foreign-policy/north-africa-southern-mediterranean/israel-restricts-water-availability-in-west-bank-and-gaza-0427/#.WcI2ga3BKt8, accessed September 15, 2017.

state, with many smaller peace-building initiatives in between. Moreover, it is also clear that the EU has many different peace-building tools at its disposal, some of which are unique, such as offering Israel and Palestine closer integration into the EU. Yet, at the same time, it is equally clear as its former foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, correctly noted many years ago, that the EU has had enormous problems throughout its involvement in the conflict to move from A to B even if it knows where Z is (the solution at the end of the road).[8] With only a few exceptions (mainly related to Hamas),[9] the EU almost always has been unwilling to use punitive measures against the parties in the conflict, particularly against Israel. Consequently, the main challenge for the EU over the foreseeable future is how to act to end the more than 50-years old Israeli occupation. The key component here is how to change the EU's verbal commitment to end the occupation into a more practical commitment. In other words, start moving from A to B on the long road to Z, which still for the EU is a two-state solution with a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

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[8] Javier Solana quoted in Paul Taylor (2003) Why Diplomacy Failed, in Reuters (eds) *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Crisis in the Middle East* (New Jersey: Pearson Education), p. 154.

[9] Michelle Pace (2007) The Construction of EU Normative Power, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 45(5), pp. 1041–1064.