



KEEPING THE HOPE OF PEACE ALIVE

The European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini asserts that the Oslo and Camp David Accords must be complemented by the realization of a two-state solution for the Palestinian–Israeli conflict in order to secure a lasting peace for the Middle East

By Federica Mogherini

Our common region—the Mediterranean and the wider Middle East—is going through a long and difficult transition. The war in Syria is not yet over and Libya is still torn by violence and instability. While there are new hopes for a de-escalation in Yemen, the road to peace is still long. The concept of a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine is being dismantled piece by piece and tensions have risen again on the border between Israel and Lebanon. In an unstable situation, regional powers are competing to shift the Middle Eastern balance of power in their favor—and this only adds to instability. Too often confrontation and militarization prevail over the search for win-win solutions. The risk of new escalations and new conflicts continues to be high, and we all know that a conflict in the Middle East could easily devolve into a large-scale war with global implications.

Against this backdrop, improved relations between Israel and the Arab World would bring a much-needed breath of fresh air. We, Europeans, support a full normalization of these relations, and we are already engaging with both the Arab World and Israel to promote practical cooperation on issues of common interest—from regional security to climate change adaptation. We are ready to accompany both parties every step in the direction of a more cooperative regional dynamic.

Yet, we are also aware that the full normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel requires a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine, following the path marked in 2002 by the Arab Peace Initiative. Our position is founded not on preconceptions, but on experience and a realistic assessment of the situation on the ground. The relevance of events in the Holy Land is immense for millions of Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Tensions around the holy sites often spark tensions in the rest of the region.

◀ European Union High Representative Federica Mogherini and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at a European Council meeting in Brussels, Jan. 22, 2018.
Courtesy of the European Union

Conversely, reconciliation between the Israelis and the Palestinians would be the solid foundation for an Arab–Israeli peace.

Preserving the Two-State Solution

Twenty-five years after the Oslo Accords, the two-state solution has not come any closer to fruition. On the contrary, the possibility of the two states living side-by-side in peace and security is fading away on the ground, and it is fading away in the hearts and minds of Israelis and Palestinians. And yet, the two-state solution remains the most viable, just, and realistic option on the table. Some believe that it is time to give up on the two-state perspective and explore other possibilities.

Europeans have made a different choice. We believe that abandoning the two-state solution would bring greater chaos to the Holy Land and the entire Middle East. The next escalation of violence in Israel and Palestine could spiral out of control, and it would have tragic consequences in a region as unstable as today's Middle East.

We do not want to face another Gaza war. We do not want to witness the collapse of the Palestinian Authority. We do not want to see hate prevail among young people in the Middle East. Our first duty then is to keep the two-state perspective alive, and in doing so, to preserve the possibility of new and meaningful negotiations toward peace.

In July 2016, the Middle East Quartet—which comprises the European Union (EU), the United States, Russia, and the United Nations—identified three trends undermining the viability of the two-state solution on the ground. First, terrorist attacks and incitement to violence. Second, the continuing Israeli policy of settlement construction and expansion, designation of land for exclusive Israeli use, and the denial of Palestinian development. Third, the illicit arms build-up and militant activity in Gaza, the continuing absence of Palestinian unity, and the dire humanitarian situation in the strip.

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Two and a half years on, these trends have not reversed and in some cases have worsened. Terrorist attacks continue to be a common feature in the daily lives of many Israelis. Settlement construction has not stopped, and the threat to demolish the Palestinian village of Khan Al-Ahmar has become emblematic of the unequal rights in access to the land—Europeans have made clear that the demolition, and the construction of new settlements in the same area, would deal a blow to the viability of a future state of Palestine, and to the very possibility of a two-state solution. The situation in Gaza continues

to be explosive, and the risk of new escalations is still too high: over a decade of Hamas rule, repeated rounds of violence, the impact of the Israeli closure, and the Palestinian political divide have all taken their toll. The situation in Gaza is not a natural disaster. It is a man-made disaster, the result of politics, or rather the lack of good politics.

Consequently, faith in the prospect of the two-state solution is also dwindling among Palestinians and Israelis. For the first time since Oslo, polls show that support for the two-state solution has fallen below 50 percent of the Israeli and Palestinian populations. I was a university student at the time of the Oslo Accords and the dream of Oslo shaped my beliefs and my political engagement—so it is painful for me to watch the two-state solution being dismissed by so many. The two-state solution remains the only way to guarantee the Palestinians’ right to freedom, self-determination and human development *and* the Israelis’ rights to security and peace.

The Palestinians have been living under occupation for over fifty years. Every day they must cross checkpoints to go to work, to school, or to pay a visit to their families. Most young Gazans have never in their lives been out of a territory barely larger than the city of Brussels. Palestinians from Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza are increasingly cut off from each other. Most Palestinians are denied the most basic rights like the right to build on their land or the right to free movement. Palestinians certainly have the right to their own state, just like the Israelis.

On the other side, the Israelis have the right to live free from fear, in peace with their neighbors. Violence against Israelis has risen again in recent months. Communities in southern Israel continue to be the target of constant attacks by Hamas and other militant groups in Gaza. I saw it with my own eyes, in Ashdod: the pain of families whose houses had been destroyed by a shell fired from Gaza. Israeli statesmen like Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Rabin, and Shimon Peres knew perfectly well that sustainable security for the Israeli people requires peace with the Palestinians and with all Arab nations.

Oslo’s vision is still valid today, although many have forgotten its core principles and goals. In difficult times like these, there is a need to go back to basics, and explain once again the rationale of the two-state solution.

The Two-State Rationale

The two-state solution is first of all about democracy: it is the only realistic way to ensure that both the Israelis and the Palestinians can democratically select their representatives and their governments, and fulfill their national aspirations of self-determination and sovereignty. This is not about creating “ethnically pure” states. As early as 1947, UN General Assembly Resolution

181 referred to the idea of two independent states for two peoples, but with full equal rights for all their respective citizens—whatever their faith and ethnicity. None of the alternatives would guarantee the same rights for Palestinians and Israelis. A single bi-national and democratic state, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, is hard to imagine—and it is not what most Israelis and Palestinians want. On the other hand, a one-state solution with unequal rights would be undemocratic, unjust, and unstable.

The two-state solution is about peace and security. The Palestinian security forces—set up thanks to the Oslo Accords—are policing most of the West Bank and cooperate regularly with Israeli security forces. For over ten years,

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the EU has contributed to making Palestinian security forces more professional and effective by training police officials and judges. Yet, the current situation is clearly unsustainable in the long run. The consolidation of the Palestinian security forces can only be part of a process leading toward the state of Palestine. If the two-state perspective were to collapse, so would the legitimacy and the *raison d'être* of Palestinian security forces. No one wants to

go back to a situation where the Palestinians cannot take care of security in their own land. The consequences would be devastating not just for the Israeli and Palestinian people, but for the region as a whole.

The two-state solution is also about economic growth. A Palestinian state is essential to guarantee full access to natural resources, a more autonomous economy and, at the same time, greater integration with the rest of the region. There can be no sustainable development without statehood. This would also be in Israel's interest—for trade, for economic cooperation, and of course, for regional stability.

The two-state solution is about a just, viable, and agreed solution to the issue of the Palestinian refugees. It is about doing justice to the legitimate aspirations of two peoples. The Palestinian people have the right to their state, alongside a strong and secure state of Israel. Denying the existence of a Palestinian identity and a people's aspiration to self-determination cannot be the way forward.

Last but not least, the two-state solution is about peace in the holy city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the cradle of three faiths and our ancestors believed that it was the center of the world. Today, Jerusalem can be a reason for division and even war. Or, it can be the most powerful symbol for peace and reconciliation. The fate of Jerusalem can only be decided through direct negotiations between the parties, based on the pre-1967 borders. There is no alternative solution that would be both viable and sustainable, meet the aspirations of the two sides, and

address their legitimate concerns. For these reasons, we continue to believe that Jerusalem should be the future capital of the two states.

The continued conflict around the holy sites is a source of instability, mistrust, and even hatred in the region. Europeans believe that regional cooperation on practical projects can contribute to easing tensions and creating the space for dialogue. However, it is hard to envision a full normalization of Arab–Israeli relations in the absence of Israeli–Palestinian peace, or worse, without a viable two-state perspective. Egypt and Jordan are the only two neighboring states in the Arab World to have official diplomatic relations with Israel. Egypt had the courage and the vision to lead the way—the peace treaty signed with Israel forty years ago in Camp David has lasted without interruption since it went into effect, and the two governments developed an important strategic partnership. Egypt is also working to facilitate intra-Palestinian dialogue, toward the resumption of the Palestinian Authority’s full responsibilities in Gaza. Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994, after the Oslo Accords. The King of Jordan is the custodian of the Holy Sites in Jerusalem and plays a fundamental role in keeping tensions low in the holy city. Both Egypt and Jordan know better than anyone else how vital it is to preserve the two-state solution—the demise of Oslo’s dream would have heavy and direct consequences on both countries. Without two states, a normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab World is practically impossible. On the contrary, the Arab Peace Initiative has already promised a full normalization of relations in exchange for peace between Israel and Palestine. As such, the two-state solution is also about regional reconciliation and global peace.

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What Europe Can and Cannot Do

The fact that it has taken so long to achieve the two-state solution does not mean that the path is wrong. In twenty-five years, no convincing alternative has emerged. The current lack of progress should not be reason to give up. On the contrary, Europeans are ready to use all our instruments—diplomatic and financial—to turn Oslo’s vision into reality. We are currently reviewing the modalities of our engagement on the ground in support of a two-state perspective. The objective of this review is to ensure that all the EU’s activities and instruments—our diplomatic engagement, our financial assistance, and our civilian missions—are as efficient and as effective as possible to advance the goal of establishing two states. The EU is Israel’s leading trading partner and the largest donor for Palestinians. We are aware of our role, and we feel the responsibility to keep Oslo’s dream alive.

When the United States announced it would stop funding the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, we immediately took action. Without UNRWA, the possibility of a negotiated two-state solution would suffer yet another blow. Thanks to UNRWA, half a million Palestinian children can go to school every day, millions of patients can receive healthcare, and thousands of people have access to jobs. This is essential infrastructure for the future of the Palestinian state, and it gives hope to millions of Palestinians. A sudden stop in the agency's services could spark violence and unrest, in a region that cannot afford further destabilization.

Preserving the two-state perspective does not mean preserving the status quo. There is an urgent need to reverse the negative trends identified by the 2016 Quartet report. Some argue we should just wait for better times. However, that is not an option. If the situation does not improve, it will get far worse. It is like riding a bicycle: if you do not move forward, you fall. Millions of Israelis and Palestinians need change—but the solution cannot be to go back to the pre-Oslo reality. The solution cannot be perennial occupation, insecurity, and conflict.

The EU has always stated this position in the clearest way possible—and I believe that, in recent months and years, the EU has become an even more

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important point of reference for the international community, and particularly for the Arab World. In times of uncertainty, we are perceived as a reliable, credible, and predictable partner. Our support for the two-state solution is here to stay. I also believe that the United States is essential for any process to succeed: no solution is possible without the United States' strong support. At the same time, it is equally clear that the United States cannot bring about a solution in isolation from the rest of the international community. In short, there can be no

peace without the United States, and there can be no peace with the United States alone.

I continue to believe in the importance of the Middle East Quartet, and I have worked to closely engage key Arab states—including Egypt and Jordan—in the Quartet's work. The EU, the Arab World, and the whole international community have an important role to play. Together we must preserve the viability of the two-state framework. We must condemn hate speech as well as illegal settlement construction. We must improve the situation in Gaza and protect communities in the south of Israel. We must accompany and incentivize the process of Palestinian reconciliation. We must continue to support cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli security forces, and work to prevent all terrorist attacks. We must invest in economic opportunities for

both peoples and in new projects for cross-border cooperation. We must refuse unilateral action on outstanding issues that can only be settled through direct negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian leaders. And we must engage with both sides, working with them to recreate the space for meaningful negotiations toward the two-state solution.

Ultimately, no one can impose peace on the Israelis and the Palestinians. We can support the two sides, but it is not for the international community to decide on their behalf. It would not be just; it would not be democratic; and it would not lead to a sustainable peace. The leaders of Israel and Palestine have a responsibility not only toward their people, but toward our region and the world. Forty years ago at Camp David and twenty-five years ago in Oslo, we saw leaders with the courage to pursue peace and reconciliation. Most of them had spent previous parts of their lives fighting and waging war against each other. They were soldiers, who became peacemakers. Some of them paid for their courage with their lives. Anwar Sadat dared to do what no other Arab leader had ever imagined: recognize the state of Israel, and get in exchange not only returned land, but peace. He put peace ahead of his popularity, and even before his own personal safety. Forty years on, Egypt and Israel still reap the fruits of Sadat's and Begin's audacity.

Oslo's dream was even more audacious. Oslo had as its goal not just to end the conflict but to create the conditions for long-lasting peace, security, and development. Sometimes I wonder whether my generation will be the one that gives up on Oslo and on peace in the Middle East. The answer has not yet been written. Some will tell us that the last twenty-five or forty years have been wasted and that the courage and the sacrifice of those leaders were in vain. Yet, that is only up to our generation. We can destroy what was achieved in years of hard work. We can repeat the mistakes of the past and go back to darker times. Or, we can preserve the agreements of the past and try to build on them. In times of darkness, keeping the fire alive can be the bravest thing to do and the best service to peace. ©

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