



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

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Executive Summary

The violent events of June 2007 in Gaza triggered an internal division of the Palestinian Authority that established two separate governing bodies – namely a Fatah-controlled West Bank and Hamas-led Gaza – and catalysed the revival of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Concerned, on the one hand, with the deterioration of the situation in the Palestinian Territories, while pleased with the emergence of a government in Ramallah free of problematic Islamist elements, the Quartet lifted the political and economic embargo on the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Immediately, there was a mad rush to create an opportunity for new peace negotiations. Gaza was left to single-handedly suffer under the crippling sanctions imposed by the Israeli government, in the hope that the worsening of the humanitarian situation in Gaza – in contrast to the renewed development in the West Bank – would pressurise Hamas into handing over its power to Fatah. Against such a backdrop, President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert made a commitment, at the US-brokered November 2007 peace conference in Annapolis, to launch negotiations on permanent status issues and to ideally reach an agreement before the end of 2008. Despite criticism of this initiative, which was launched before national reconciliation could be achieved among the Palestinian parties, members of the Arab League attended the meeting. Members of the European Union were among the participants, and these included 2 new member states – Slovenia, as the country holding the EU presidency at the time, and Poland.

Based on more than 30 interviews with government officials, experts, journalists and development workers in Poland, Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), and Jordan, this report is a study of Poland's policy, as a new EU member state (2004-2008), towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It looks at the role Poland plays and could potentially play in the Middle East Peace Process, while investigating whether there exists a need for a greater involvement of the new EU member states, in the context of the re-launch of negotiations triggered by the Annapolis conference. Additionally, it examines Palestinian and Israeli perceptions of Poland with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Key findings of this study can be summarised in the following points:

- Poland's policy towards the Middle East is comprised of two instruments: its military presence (in Iraq, Afghanistan) and peacekeeping missions (in South Lebanon and the Golan Heights), as well as its development aid, which Poland has been providing since its integration into the European Union. The Polish government identified the Palestinian Authority as one of its nine priority countries in terms of assistance, and thus its policy responds to EU Council resolutions. However, Poland's development assistance programme remains a relatively small portion of the total contributions made by the EU to the Palestinians.
- Poland maintains a policy of "equal distance", aspiring to nurture good relations with both parties and present itself as a neutral player. There is a belief within certain Polish policy-making circles that Poland could act as a mediator between Israel and the Palestinians given its good relations with both parties, its lack of a colonial past, and its recent experience of structural transformation.
- Due to a shared Jewish history, and Poland's complex and emotional relationship with the Jewish people, Israel expects more political support from Poland than from any other EU member. Despite Poland's desire to remain 'neutral' towards the conflict, the most common perception among Israeli officials is that Poland is "Israel's ambassador in the European Union".
- For a very long time, new EU member states were ignored by the Palestinians due to the Soviet bloc's legacy of traditionally good relations, extensive commercial ties and political alliances with Arab states. Poland, as well as other new members, became of interest to the Palestinian Authority once it began pursuing an openly pro-American foreign policy. The Palestinian leadership's fear was that this would translate into a pro-Israeli stance.
- Nonetheless, not much attention is paid to Poland as a player with its own agenda and policy in the region. Poland only becomes of interest to the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority as a member of the European Union, since it is now able to influence Council Conclusions.
- Israel is well aware of the fact that the United States has more leverage over all the relevant players than any of the EU member states. So are the Palestinians. Both parties in the conflict seem solely interested in the greater role of any given country for the purposes of Public Diplomacy, in order to change other members' positions or to sway the overall balance in their favour.

- As regards direct negotiations, the PLO and members of the Fatah-led government in the West Bank favour a greater involvement of the EU, but as a unified impartial body that translates its values (grounded in international humanitarian law) into policy, rather than as 27 separate and contradictory peace mediators. The Israeli government, in turn, questions the added value of increased Polish involvement in the conflict negotiations.

Introduction

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

As a new EU member state, Poland's interest in the Middle East would naturally increase because of the responsibilities imposed by membership. But more important are its own ambitions to shape both regional and global policy. This aim is evident in Poland's growing commitment to contribute towards the development of the Global South and to work towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. 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, is also note-worthy.

Although Poland is not directly part of the Quartet¹, it is indirectly involved in the Middle East Peace Process through its participation in EU policy. As such, it can influence the outcome of Council Conclusions and official statements regarding the conflict. However, its aspirations seem directed towards playing a bigger role in bilateral relations. Given its good relations with both conflicted parties, Poland has presented a certain potential and willingness to become a more important player in the peace process. This paper will examine the various elements that make up 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 in the process as a member of the EU and will assess the added value of its participation within the context of the new American initiative and the Annapolis Peace conference. Generally, the role of Poland, as a new EU member state, in the Middle-East conflict will be analysed. The paper will therefore concentrate on the post-enlargement years, i.e. 2004-2008.

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 official, these are “interesting times” in terms of negotiation prospects². After a week of deadly clashes, which resulted in over 100 deaths, and scenes of torture in Palestinian society due to a bloody cycle of retaliation, Hamas eventually managed 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 two parties – and appointed a new emergency government headed by the internationally recognised Finance Minister Salam Fayyad. In his statement that day, Abu Mazen used strong language to condemn Hamas’ actions, denouncing the party as “murderous terrorists” and “coup plotters”³. While many Palestinian officials would agree with such accusations, some point to the fact that the new “emergency government” established through presidential decree is not constitutional because it has not been ratified by the parliament, and that it thus contravenes Palestinian law.

Equal blame is dealt to both parties for having demonstrated a lack of responsibility, shortsightedness and hunger for power – on the one hand, the international community for imposing sanctions on the Palestinian Authority (PA) after the 2006 elections, and on the other, Israel for its continued occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip despite disengagement. The majority of the population (85%) would, however, like to see a renewal of negotiations between Hamas and Fatah⁴. Indeed, it seems that in the eyes of the Palestinians national reconciliation is more important than peace with Israel, which “only” 58 % would like to see happen under the present circumstances⁵. This is not to say that Palestinians are not interested in a peace solution, but according to public opinion, any sustainable agreement would have to include Hamas. There is a growing sense of divide between the West Bank and Gaza. After the June 2007 events, the Gaza Strip is not only seen by West Bankers as a geographically separate entity, but the division has now become mental and thus far more engrained. Suffering as a result of the Israeli occupation – physically expressed in the form of the separation 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 many think that it is now governed by a “brutal, merciless force”⁶. However, as profound as this divide might be, any leader who tries to reach a deal with Israel while compromising Palestinian reconciliation and unity would end up losing credibility and legitimacy, since the public would qualify these actions as a continuation of the Nakba (catastrophe) of 1948, precisely when Palestinian identity started being defined in terms of dispersion and geographical fragmentation⁷.

Despite the population’s concern for unity, the international community has, according to conflict resolution experts, adopted a divisive “West Bank first”⁸ strategy. It has recognised 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 here pursued is that by creating financial incentives to adhere to the more moderate Palestinian leaders, i.e. Fatah, the Palestinians will become more pragmatic in their options and Hamas will eventually lose popular support. 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: firstly, the vision of Hamas, which “would guarantee chaos and suffering, and the endless perpetuation of grievance”, crushing “the possibility of a Palestinian state”, in diametric opposition to the alternative vision 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”⁹. Bush’s words were almost immediately converted into action when the United States lifted the political and economic embargo on the PA in Ramallah. In addition, President Bush hopes to strengthen Mahmoud Abbas’ popularity by encouraging bilateral talks with Israel, and thereby proving that he is the sole Palestinian leader who can secure peace through negotiations¹⁰.

It is in this light that one should read the release of 255 prisoners – the vast majority of them Fatah-affiliated West Bankers – from Israeli jails on 20 July 2007, as well as a recent deal negotiated in mid-September 2007 to free another 87; the release of Palestinian tax revenues and financial aid, which allowed payment of the first salary in months of civil servants in the West Bank; as well as the President’s attempts to persuade Israel to ease security measures by eliminating some of the checkpoints that were ruining both Palestinian economy and social life¹¹.

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

2 IPA interview with a 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.

5 Ibidem.

6 IPA interview with Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Chairman PASFIA, August 2007, Jerusalem.

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

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

9 “President Bush Discusses the Middle East”, 16 July 2007, accessed at:

www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/2007/88506.htm.

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

11 IPA Interview with Palestinian Official, Jericho, August 2007.

Following the events in Gaza, Israel has shut off the main crossing to the Strip – Karni – halting any import or export of raw materials and thus rendering the area even more dependent on international handouts. More recently, Israel declared the Gaza Strip an “enemy entity”, in retaliation to the firing of Qassam rockets into its territory (including one that wounded over 60 soldiers), and announced that it would take appropriate steps, contravening its bilateral obligations under international humanitarian law towards the civilian population. Indeed, on 19 September Israel announced that it would completely “disrupt and/or reduce their already limited supply of electricity and fuel”, which constitutes 60 % of Gaza’s overall electrical supply¹². Taking advantage of the fact that Israeli companies are the direct fuel suppliers for the Gaza Power Plant, which generates the required energy¹³, Israel would only allow the entry of enough fuel to power the electrical generators in hospitals. Similarly, if the firing of rockets continues, border crossings would only remain open for humanitarian aid, essential food and medical supplies – further weakening Gaza’s economy.

The imposition of new sanctions coincided with a visit to the region by Condoleezza Rice, 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 abandon the innocent Palestinians in Gaza”. The discrepancy between diplomatic rhetoric and the facts on the ground leaves many Arab governments sceptical about the US-brokered Annapolis meeting. At the time of writing this report, the interviewees’ major concern was that key actors essential to lending legitimacy to the process, such as Saudi Arabia, were reluctant to participate in the conference without a previous acceptance of the principles outlined in the Arab Initiative, which would offer a promise of real negotiations. It was suggested that the conference would result in declaratory statements, unaccompanied by the political commitment needed to create an environment conducive to the transformation of words into actions. What is more, even countries that have signed bilateral agreements with Israel, such as Jordan and Egypt, remained sceptical given that two months before the scheduled meeting they had not seen any real American involvement in the preparation for the talks. Lastly, no comprehensive Middle East Peace Process can take place without Syria, which repeatedly declared its lack of interest in participating in the conference at a time when Israel was seeking to justify an air strike on Syrian territory by linking it to the alleged weapons of mass destruction program of Al-Assad’s regime. Nonetheless, and despite strong public criticism of the conference, it seems that members of the Arab League’s Follow-Up Committee¹⁴ – tasked with promoting the Arab Peace Initiative – could not afford to be absent once the Palestinian leadership had decided to accept the American offer and engage in the process. As a result, all attended the conference at the ministerial level, including Syria, which was represented by a deputy foreign minister.

The climate in Israel seemed to be in favour 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, official discourse remained within the realm of a broad set of declarations focused on a two-state solution and peace. The Declaration of Principles based on the Clinton Parameters¹⁵, and even the mere mention of final-status issues, seemed taboo, reinforcing doubts in Palestine as to whether Israel is genuinely interested in peace.

The takeover of Gaza emphasised the need to attain 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 and within certain political circles in Palestine, yet was received with scepticism by the population due to his involvement in the invasion of Iraq. Tony Blair was given the mandate to support Palestinian institution-building, by mobilising international assistance in cooperation with donors and by “developing plans to promote Palestinian economic development, including private sector partnerships”¹⁶, while also working towards the implementation of past agreements on access and movement. Many predict – and hope – that Blair will interpret his mandate in a way that allows more room for diplomacy¹⁷.

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”, to isolate Hamas both economically and politically, and “resume normal relations with the Palestinian Authority”¹⁸ in Ramallah. Additionally, EU ministers stressed the need to continue their programme of humanitarian assistance in Gaza. On 7 July, the EU decided to continue its European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in Rafah in a fully operational mode, while downsizing its staff¹⁹.

12 After a petition submitted by 10 Israeli and Palestinian human rights organisations, 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 EU’s reaction to the decision was firm, with the EU Commissioner for External Relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, warning against collective punishment.

The post-Gaza discourse flowing out of Brussels was in line with the Quartet's stance – it was one of optimism, hope and opportunity, focused on advancing negotiations and the peace process. There seems however to be greater understanding about the consequences of a divisive policy towards the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In an open letter to Tony Blair, published in *Le Monde* on 10 July, ten foreign ministers of Mediterranean member states²⁰ affirmed that Hamas' takeover of Gaza might paradoxically stimulate hope and progress, seeing as it has instilled a new awareness of the extent of the crisis gripping Palestine:

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

Although optimism is evident in Brussels, there seems to be much more scepticism on the ground among EU officials reporting on the daily situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). The decision to embrace Salam Fayyad's new government and to lift economic sanctions have, however, paradoxically proved a disincentive for Fatah's reconciliation with Hamas, seeing as it presumes that such a situation would lead to assistance being cut-off once again and to the re-implementation of the restricted contact policy. According to EU officials on the ground, the political climate in Ramallah is such that a rapprochement is not conceivable in the near future²¹. Furthermore, in their eyes, the EU's long-term objectives, found outlined in the Road Map – i.e. “building the institutions of a democratic, independent and viable Palestinian state, living in peace and security with Israel²²” – are being eroded on a daily basis due to the Union's policy of no-contact with Hamas in Gaza, inevitably leading to further radicalisation. While humanitarian assistance is crucial to preventing the collapse of the PA and a full-blown humanitarian crisis, it is unsustainable and only responds to short-term political decisions. Unfortunately, this trend is a reverse of the EU and Quartet goals set out in the Road Map, i.e. institutional reform and development.

The momentum building up, at the time of writing this report, towards the November Annapolis conference – a US-led initiative seen by many as a 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 to²³”. Even if Mahmoud Abbas and Ehud Olmert managed to negotiate a final status agreement, the Gaza question and the issue of power-sharing within the Palestinian political scene would still remain. In such a context, what is the EU's and Poland's potential to influence negotiations? Similarly, what is expected of them, by both the Palestinians and Israelis, in respect to the conflict? Before answering these questions, it might be worth addressing EU involvement in the Peace Process from a historical perspective.

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

14 The Arab League Follow-Up Committee is comprised of the Arab League Secretariat, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen.

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

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

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

17 IPA Interview with EC official, Tel Aviv, August 2007.

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

19 European Union Border Assistance Mission Rafah, “EU decides to maintain EUBAM”, 7 July 2007 <http://www.eubam-rafah.eu/portal/en/node/352>.

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

21 IPA Interview with EC official, Jerusalem 2007.

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

23 IPA Interview with EC official, Jerusalem 2007.

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

Due to a geographic proximity, a concern for its own security and internal stability, as well as its historic ties or “moral debt” towards the Middle East, Europe could never afford to turn its back on a conflict taking place on its door step. However, it was not until 1980 and the Venice Declaration that member states agreed on a unified position, expressing their support for Palestinian self-determination while accepting the PLO as a partner in negotiations²⁴. This document classified settlements as not only an obstacle to peace, but as illegal under international law. Throughout the years, the EU has built on the Venice Declaration, eventually developing a clear position towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that supports a two state solution and a policy consisting of declaratory diplomacy and commercial ties, and which promotes the EU values of democracy, political reform and the rule of law through development assistance. As one of the members of the Quartet, today the European Union officially asserts its commitment 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 Israel²⁵”. Furthermore, its position is now clear and unified on certain principles underlying the conflict: the EU condemns terrorism, settlement expansion, construction of the West Bank wall, and restrictions on movement, all in equal measure. What differs among its member states is the way in which these issues are addressed in terms of declaratory diplomacy. In recent times, the role of the EU has grown as regards political and financial involvement. One example of this is the Temporary International Mechanism, which was designed by the Commission to channel aid directly to the Palestinian people – as opposed to transferring funds to the government’s Single Treasury Account – after the political embargo was imposed on the Hamas-led government²⁶. The EU also convinced the United States to endorse its aid plan. Consequently, expectations have increased regarding the EU’s involvement in the region’s affairs. These expectations are expressed primarily by the Palestinian side, which considers itself the weaker and more vulnerable party in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict²⁷. The Palestinians view the EU as a possible counterweight to the United States and as a more objective power, although the interviewees have repeatedly pointed to the cooperation between the EU and United States through the Middle East Quartet.

In the early days of the Peace Process, at both the 1991 Madrid Conference 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. This European invisibility on the Middle Eastern political scene – despite the EU’s obvious interest in the region – can be attributed to two main reasons. Firstly, its internal lack of cohesion with respect to foreign policy, despite efforts to simplify its formulation and implementation by appointing a High Representative of the EU, established in the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997. Secondly, both the Palestinian and the Israeli leaderships blindly believed in the United States’ mediation power. The Palestinians view the Americans as the main player, having a strong leverage over Israel; whereas the Israelis believe that the Americans have their best interest in mind and thus consider them as their primary ally in the region. As such, for years during the Peace Process Israel preferred to maintain a purely economic relationship with the EU, while investing politically in the United States. By signing the Euro-Med 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 represent a political problem²⁸ for the EU – a position limiting the EU’s leverage over Israel.

The end to the American monopoly of the peace process, and its subsequent internationalisation, was spawned by the failure of Camp David summit in 2000 and the change of administrations in the United States. Whereas Bill Clinton was determined “to devote as much of his presidency as it took to make the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations succeed”, and insisted on the urgency of the matter, after 9/11 the Bush administration became more preoccupied with the Global War on Terror. This geopolitical change arguably provided an opportunity for the internationalisation of negotiations through the creation of the Quartet in 2002, of which the EU is a full member. The EU High Representative Javier Solana thus became much more visible in the region, taking part in the Sharm el-Sheikh Summit, following the failure of Camp David in 2000. A year later, the role of the EU was enhanced by 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 directly oversee the negotiations, Moratinos interviewed both negotiating teams immediately after the talks, on the basis of which he then drafted an unofficial document presenting both positions on the final status issues and identifying the main differences²⁹. In general, since the beginning of his tenure in 1996, Moratinos played an important role by being in close and regular contact with all the parties in the conflict and by trying to bridge the gap between narratives. As for his successor, Marc Otte had to take on new responsibilities given that the situation

24 European Community, “Venice Declaration on the Middle East”, 12-13 June 1980, accessed at: http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/mepp/decl/index.htm#10.

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

26 Despite the embargo on direct assistance to the Palestinian Authority, the European Union delivered significantly more assistance in 2006 and 2007 than in previous years. Most of these funds were channelled through the Temporary International Mechanism, the UNRWA and NGOs, and responded to the population’s humanitarian needs.

27 This argument was highlighted in all IPA interviews conducted with Palestinian officials and experts.

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

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

30 Eldar Akiva, “Moratinos Document – The peace that nearly was at Taba”, *Haaretz*, 14 February 2002.

on the ground changed in 2005, after the Gaza disengagement. Apart from the traditional reporting functions and the promotion of dialogue between parties or initiatives potentially leading to a final agreement, Otte became heavily involved in reforming the Palestinian security sector through EUPOLCOPPS³¹ and in the monitoring of international agreements through the EUBAM mission at the Rafah crossing. Furthermore, the EU, together with other Quartet members, sponsored the Road Map, which was initiated in 2002 under the Danish Presidency³².

Despite its historical evolution, a common depiction of the European Union's role in the Middle East Peace Process is that of a *payer*, as opposed to a *player*³³. As the largest donor to the Palestinian Authority (PA) since the advent of the Oslo era, the EU has tirelessly been attempting to build peace between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as to secure the foundations of a viable Palestinian state, precisely through aid³⁴. Yet due to the failure of the Camp David Summit, and in response to the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa intifada, it has been repeatedly suggested that rather than using its economic leverage, through either positive or negative conditionality, to play a bigger part in the political peace process, the EU has in fact become a subsidiser for the Israeli occupation. As such, it has arguably assumed some of the occupying power's responsibilities under international law vis-à-vis the occupied population.

Indeed, it is estimated that the grants and loans given by the EU and its member states amounted to more than 6 billion euros during 1994-2006, an average of 500 million euros a year³⁵. Almost one third of this sum was used to support UNRWA's³⁶ work in assisting Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, while the remaining amount has been utilised to finance development projects through Palestinian non-governmental organizations, for humanitarian aid, as well as direct budget support for the PA³⁷. Despite the boycott of the PA since Hamas won the legislative elections in January 2006, and the imposition of the 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- and institution-building, and on humanitarian aid, does not translate into a more visible political role for the EU in the Middle East. In addition, many point out that short-term political actions, such as the decision to boycott the Hamas government in January 2006, are in fact damaging to the EU's long-term goals. While EU assistance had begun to shift towards development projects and institutional reform, it relapsed back to humanitarian aid after the imposition of the economic and political embargo. Such a tough stance did not merely have an economic impact; it affected people's trust in the EU's good will, as well as the whole process of reform, transformation, and belief in the principles of democracy.

³¹ EU Police Coordinating Office for Palestinian Police Support.

³² 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.

³³ IPA interview with Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Chairman of PASSIA, September 2007, Jerusalem. The statement that the "European Union is a payer, not a player" was reiterated by most Israeli and Palestinian interviewees. The first person to formulate this view however, is believed to be Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

³⁴ Brynen, R. (2005) "Donor Aid to Palestine: Attitudes, Incentives, Patronage and Peace", in Keating, M., Le More A. & Lowe, R. (eds.) *Aid, Diplomacy and Facts on the Ground*, (London: Chatham House).

³⁵ "EU assistance to the PA", http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/occupied_palestinian_territory/ec_assistance/index_en.htm.

³⁶ UNRWA: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East.

³⁷ 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 is becoming an increasingly important focus of Poland's concern. Under communism, Poland led a pro-Arab policy. Since 1989, however, it has pursued a policy of "equal distance", as was stressed by several officials. This policy has undergone no change, in spite of the different governments that have held office over the last seventeen years and Poland's accession to the European Union. Poland has no ambition to develop an independent Middle East policy, but being the largest of all the New Member States, it is aware of its influence within the European Union. Poland's traditionally good relations with Arab countries, as well as its historic ties with Israel, sometimes create the temptation to play a greater role in conflict resolution. Unofficially, Poland has often declared its willingness to engage in mediations. As one Polish official admitted, maintaining an "equal distance" and good relations with both parties is not enough. Palestinians welcomed Polish attempts, whereas Israel was not interested in the initiative. Israel hopes that Poland will advance a pro-Israeli stance in EU institutions. In Israeli eyes, the European Union is perceived as supporting the Palestinian cause while Poland and the Czech Republic, being the strongest US allies among the New Member States, are thus considered potential allies of Israel. But according to Israeli officials³⁸, Poland has to first learn how to operate within the EU institutional framework and effectively express its opinions. Poland must become more active and work together with other New Member States, through the Visegrad Group for example, since a collective voice is more audible than a single one. To sum up, the enlargement did not significantly change the EU's role in the Middle East, although both sides in the conflict do feel that they received renewed support for their policies. Israel believes it has more allies among the pro-American New Member States, while Arab states, including the Palestinian Authority, still remember and appreciate the pro-Arab policies conducted by these countries in the past. Consequently, the Palestinians have sought to convince the Polish government that they have better contacts in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon than the United States does, and therefore better access to inside information on potential developments. Poland needs the Palestinians if it wants to assume a bigger role in the Middle East and in the EU. Polish officials seem to be in agreement 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."³⁹

Poland officially supports the Middle East Quartet's efforts towards reaching a solution that would eventually lead to the creation of two states living in peace and security within internationally recognised borders. As such, Poland's reaction to the Gaza takeover was understandably in line with the EU position, which declared that the "bloody coup undertaken by Hamas deserves condemnation in the strongest words". Consequently, Poland was wary to declare that the resumption of any sort of dialogue with the Islamist movement would depend on its fulfilment of the conditions imposed by the Quartet – namely, renouncing terrorism, recognising Israel and respecting previous agreements⁴⁰. It thus adopted a stance more in line with the United States, distancing itself from Southern countries, which expressed their concern for a degree of reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah.

Furthermore, Poland recognised the urgency of security sector reform, as well as of governmental economic reforms leading to the betterment of living conditions in the Territory. It welcomed the transfer of tax revenues and the release of Palestinian prisoners, calling such actions "a positive signal on Israel's side", and applauded the Arab League's readiness to cooperate with Israel – an attitude which it hopes will contribute to a solution. In addition, Poland lent its full support to Tony Blair, in the belief that his expertise in Middle Eastern politics will allow him to constructively engage the Quartet in the region. According to the official Polish stance, the Annapolis peace conference was seen as a crucial initiative for the renewal of the peace process. Nonetheless, Poland stressed that the success of this conference hinged on the participation of both Saudi Arabia and Israel. Lastly, Poland believes in reviving the peace initiative and in restoring broken relations between Israeli and Palestinian communities through the reestablishment of economic, cultural and academic cooperation, which it seeks to achieve through a trilateral Palestinian-Israeli-Polish dialogue. As regards development aid, preference is given to projects that involve cooperation between Palestinian NGOs and Israeli partners – both at the governmental and non-governmental level – in a bid to restore trust locally. Do these statements manage to go beyond mere rhetoric, translating into action and actual policy implemented on the ground? What are the instruments being deployed by Poland in order to pursue its goals?

³⁸ IPA Interview with Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel, Jerusalem, August 2007.

³⁹ IPA Interview with Polish Official, Ramallah 2007.

⁴⁰ Departament Afryki i Bliskiego Wschodu, „Stanowisko dot. aktualnego stanu procesu pokojowego na Bliskim Wschodzie”, 30 August 2007.

Two major components currently make up Polish policy in the Middle East: its military presence / peacekeeping missions and its development aid, which has been provided since Poland's integration into the European Union.

Military Presence

Although no external power is directly involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, military involvement in the Middle East is relevant to any given country's policy towards this conflict, due to the regional dynamics and the influence all crises exert on each other. There is no doubt that the war in Iraq has altered regional alliances and thus influenced the Israeli-Palestinian conflict externally. It has managed, for instance, to deepen the Sunni-Shiite divide not only in Iraq, but also in other Middle Eastern states, as well as amongst non-state actors. In addition, and according to Abdul Hadi, the images of sectarian violence have had a tremendous internal effect on the Palestinian society. The violence on the Palestinian streets, the kidnappings and acts of retaliation between members of Hamas and Fatah, as seen in the Gaza Strip, are all recent phenomena, previously non-existent in a highly politicised 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?

It is conventionally believed that as a strategic ally of the US in Europe, Poland's policy is solely pro-American, yet most decision-makers assert that in fact it represents a mix of pure pragmatism and an EU-driven agenda. Poland expressed its political support for the US-led military intervention against Iraq in March 2003. This support translated into the deployment of 2500 Polish troops, which were primarily used for the stabilisation and reconstruction of the country and were incorporated in the Multinational Division Center-South. The Polish contingent was soon made responsible for a zone consisting of five provinces – Babil, Karbala, Diwaniya, Najaf and Wasit – as well as for patrolling the region and providing security training to the Iraqi army. While the security situation has since then progressively worsened, having reached a stage that many define as “civil war”, and the number of US troops has increased, the Polish government took the decision – along with the other European actors involved – to downsize its contingent first to 1500 and, as of March 2006, down to 900 troops. This decision reflected two main concerns: to limit Poland's involvement in the military operations, and to allow the Iraqi army to gradually take over 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 great hope that the military presence would result, on the one hand, in the Polish companies' extensive participation in the reconstruction of Iraq and, on the other, increased American investment in Poland, accompanied by a strengthening of their political alliance.

After the 2007 parliamentary elections in Poland, the government was formed by the pro-European Civic Platform and the Polish Peasant Party. They both agreed that Polish troops would be withdrawn from Iraq in 2008. The main reason underlying this decision was the growing opposition of political parties and public opinion against the war in Iraq, as well as a conviction amongst officials that the intervention is coming to an end. Many countries have already withdrawn from Iraq, with Poland being one of the few still present. Even though Poland sent the largest number of troops after the American and British contingents, the government of the United States did not reward this commitment by nurturing a more privileged relationship with Poland.

There is a belief amongst Polish officials that the country's participation in the stabilising mission in Iraq has elevated it to the status of “an important player” on the Middle Eastern map and allowed it to gain the respect of Arab governments, which in the view of one interviewee “are fond of power”⁴¹. The overall feeling within policy-making circles in Warsaw is that Poland's military presence in the region is well-perceived and welcomed by Arab countries because of its respect for their 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 this military involvement means for the region itself and the security of its people; it is rather perceived in terms of how Poland's interests can be advanced.

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 missions 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”⁴². Following this line of reasoning and its desire to participate in the shaping of EU and international policy towards the Middle East, Poland strengthened its military presence as part of UNIFIL II 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

⁴¹ IPA Interview with Polish Diplomat, August 2007.
⁴² IPA Interview with Polish Official, Ministry of Defense, August 2007.

UN resolution implementing a cease-fire between the Israeli army and Hezbollah. Poland thus increased its troops from 180 to 500 soldiers. The number remains too small – the total military personnel is of 13,349 – for Poland to guarantee its visibility, play a bigger bilateral role, or mediate between Israel and Lebanon – yet this does not even seem to be its ambition. When asked why Poland got involved, Polish decision-makers assert that they complied with an EU policy of concern for Israel's security, by monitoring the border, and for Lebanon's post-war reconstruction. Poland's involvement in military and peacekeeping missions seems to be primarily driven by the ambition to secure its own political and economic interests as an EU member, rather than a bid to fulfil 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 into a French contingent⁴³. On the one hand, it appears to respond to responsibilities imposed by membership, rather than reflect any 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. Therefore, Poland is primarily perceived as a pragmatic actor, rather than one who merely complies with US policies.

Development Aid

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, these take the form of contractual relations in the areas of trade, technology, security, industry, 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 degrading humanitarian conditions and the absence of an independent state. 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.

This firstly suggests that although there is a declared even-handedness towards the conflict, along with 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 – namely that the PA will have to undergo changes before any agreement with Israel is reached. Secondly, the highly politicised nature of aid is a way for Poland to impose its own policies while still in compliance with the EU agenda. Such policy has become even more visible in Poland since the 2005 elections, when both President Kaczyński and the centrist Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) assumed power. According to a Polish diplomat, Poland's political right is rather pro-Israeli, for obvious historical reasons and due to the ideology that defined its style of governance: "Kaczyński likes the fact that Israel has a similar vision of a strong country and 'state democracy', which puts a strong emphasis on security⁴⁴". This fondness seems to be reciprocated, with Israel having officially supported Poland's participation in the UNIFIL II peacekeeping mission in South Lebanon and praised its military presence in Iraq as a show of its commitment to ensuring regional, and more importantly, international security⁴⁵.

By integrating the EU structures, Poland had to shift from being a recipient of aid into becoming a donor country. As early 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). As regards money spent on development aid, here again Poland complies with EU obligations, which expected this aid to amount to 0.1% of the Polish GDP in 2006, before then increasing to 0.17 % of the GDP by 2010⁴⁶. Apart from political, ethical, socio-economic or state security reasons for involvement in a global commitment to cooperation and development, Poland's motivations also stem from its modern history and the assistance it received when carrying out structural reforms and transformation in the 1990's. According to the official assistance strategy set out in 2003, Poland prioritises countries in the process of structural change, especially in Eastern and Southern Europe, as well as 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 to promoting activities designed to prevent deadly conflict and that serve state security. Realising both its limited experience in ODA and resources in comparison to other donors, Poland decided to limit its intervention to the following core areas: health, science and education, water and sanitation, protection of the environment, capacity-building, supporting democratic institutions and trans-boundary cooperation⁴⁷. In addition, it decided to specialise in areas where it could make a valuable contribution and where its involvement would represent an added value. One such example is Poland's efforts in the Palestinian

43 IPA Interview with Polish Official, Ministry of Defense, August 2007.44 IPA Interview with Polish official, Tel Aviv, August 2007.

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

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

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

Territory, which concentrate on trilateral initiatives aimed at bringing 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, and civil society.

In 2007, nine countries were identified as a priority. These include Belarus, which received 7 million euros in assistance, Ukraine, given 4 million euros, followed by Afghanistan (2,1 million euros), Georgia, Moldova, Tanzania, and finally Angola, the Palestinian Territory and Iraq, which were each allocated 500 000 euros. Assistance was channelled through both 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 received most of the funding should come as no surprise since the decision complies with the 2003 official development assistance strategy. Iraq and Afghanistan are also obvious choices due to the presence of Polish troops in those countries. The rationale justifying the aid provided to the remaining countries is, however, 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 reach the Millennium Development Goals. The increase of Polish aid to the Palestinian Territory (from a mere 130 000 euros in 2005, up to 500 000 euros in 2006 and 2007) was, firstly, a direct response to the decision 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 to address the worsening humanitarian situation. Secondly, the assistance is justified by the traditionally good relations between "Poland and the Palestinian people"⁴⁸.

Faced with the numerous recent wars, such as in Darfur or the Congo, which have taken the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, one might wonder why the Palestinian Territory, 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 with aspirations to be recognised as an international political player wants, for Public Diplomacy purposes, to be somewhat involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict. As cynical as it may sound, before bringing about any real change, development aid grants visibility⁴⁹. On the other hand, there is a genuine conviction among some officials working on the ground that Poland has a key role to play and that it stands to offer a fresh perspective because of its "special alliance" with Israel and its traditionally good relations with Arab states⁵⁰. The decision to establish bilateral relations with the PA first came about in 2000, but it was not until 2004 that a Polish Representative Office was established in Ramallah, due to the outbreak of the second Intifada. Yet other new EU members, such as the Czech Republic and Hungary, opened Representative offices as early as 1999 and 2000, a situation that prevented the Polish monopoly on relations with the PA among the Visegrad Group, as some would have liked.

In 2007, Poland mostly funded projects in the realm of water and sanitation, education, health, as well as micro-projects, most of which were implemented by the Polish Humanitarian Organisation in cooperation with local counterparts. In addition, it also provided direct assistance to refugees via a grant to UNRWA. Its real interest, however, is to strengthen the "peace fabric" by facilitating cross-cultural dialogue between the Palestinians and the Israelis, modelled after the Polish reconciliation with Ukraine and Germany. But how is this involvement perceived by the beneficiaries themselves?

48 Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Polski program pomocy zagranicznej udzielanej za pośrednictwem MSZ RP w roku 2007", Warsaw, 2007.

49 IPA Interview with EC Official, August 2007, Jerusalem.

50 IPA Interview with Polish official, August 2007, Ramallah.

4. The Palestinian Narrative

As a recipient of European assistance, Palestine has become an example of peace-building through aid, rather than as a result of political and natural social processes. It was thus bombarded by multiple and conflicting donor agendas, leaving its political and economic needs somewhat marginalised. 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”, who is unable or unwilling to translate the money it spends to achieve its goals in Israel and Palestine into real political leverage⁵¹. A commonly reiterated public perception is that by annually spending millions of euros on projects aimed at improving the lives of the Palestinians, the EU is effectively subsidising the Israeli occupation and assuming a responsibility that should be Israel's under international law.

Interviewees have often cited the destruction of EU-funded infrastructure projects by the Israeli army as one such example. The EC most recently estimated that the damage inflicted by Israel to EU-funded projects in the Palestinian Territory amounts to 44 million euros⁵². This includes: the destruction of the runway at Gaza International Airport and the bombing of the Gaza seaport, the offices of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, the building and studio of the Palestine Broadcasting Corporation during the Ramallah incursion, and of laboratories used for a counter-terrorism program – to quote but a few⁵³. 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 on the claim that the process would be extremely difficult for two main reasons. Firstly, the internal structure of the EU would hamper the compensation process since projects are not only channelled through the Commission, but also through member states. Secondly, once completed, 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:

“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 to “ask for its money back” by using the leverage it has over Israel through the EU-Israel Association Agreement, which guarantees it economic benefits. They point to the fact that such action has been taken in the past with respect to taxation imposition on settlers' products⁵⁴. Even though some voices within the European Parliament, traditionally seen as pro-Palestinian, have gone so far as to call for the suspension of this agreement at a UN conference that took place in Brussels in September 2007, in protest of human rights violations in the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinians are quite disillusioned. They are conscious that within an ever-growing EU, encompassing numerous conflicting agendas, a consensus would not be reached to impose such a decision. Many Palestinian interviewees have repeatedly said 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”⁵⁵. According to the Palestinian narrative, the question of the EU's role in the conflict, or that of any of the new member states, seems inseparable from the dominant position of the US in the Middle East.

Israel's privileged relationship with the United States is well known. However, according to the Palestinian narrative it is not only this partnership that drives American policy towards the Middle East, and which consequently affects the conflict. It is suggested that the American agenda has for the last 6 years been defined by what Abdul Hadi calls the 5 “I's”, namely Islamophobia (which developed after 9/11), Iraq, Iran, Israel, and finally, Intelligence⁵⁶. The United States hijacked the Quartet in order to pursue its own agenda in the region, which in turn had huge repercussions on how the conflict is now perceived, and is subsequently being resolved. Whereas there was no doubt that the first Intifada (1987-93) was grounded in a struggle for statehood and national liberation⁵⁷, 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, having compromised the moral dimension of their struggle by carrying out suicide attacks against Israeli civilian population and by the Islamisation 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 leads many to believe that religion is in fact

⁵¹ IPA Interviews, PASSIA, EC Delegation in Jerusalem and the Negotiation Support Unit, August 2007.

⁵² Cronin David, “Call to halt EU trade with Israel”, Inter Press Service, 4 September 2007.

⁵³ DFID, “Physical Damages Inflicted by IDF Attacks to EU funded Development Project”. ⁵⁴ IPA Interview with Negotiation Support Unit, Ramallah, August 2007.

⁵⁵ IPA interview with Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Chairman PASSIA, August 2007, Jerusalem.

⁵⁶ IPA Interview with Mahdi Abdul Hadi, PASSIA, August 2007.

⁵⁷ Andoni Ghassan (2000) “A Comparative Study of Intifada 1987 and 2000”, in R. Carey (ed.) *Resisting Israel's Apartheid* (London, New York: Verso).

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 the rivalries between international and regional agendas.

Palestinians generally welcome EU involvement in the areas of democracy, institution- and capacity-building, education, waste water management and the environment, as well as technical assistance, and recognise its strong commitment to human rights. However, they would like to see the humanitarian assistance and development programs complemented by a more prominent political role for 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, but rather a political environment that hampers human and social development, through restrictions on movement for example⁵⁸. This is clearly a dilemma that characterises development under occupation.

As previously mentioned, Palestinians would like the EU to use its economic and technological partnership with Israel as a means of pressuring the latter to conform to international humanitarian law and to convince Israel to re-engage in genuine final status talks. Palestinians point out that settlements have literally doubled in size during the era of the Oslo peace process and that despite the International Court of Justice's ruling in 2004, which declared the wall in the West Bank as illegal, Israel continued its construction for a further three years. In addition, the current restriction apparatus present in the West Bank and Gaza Strip prevents the development of the Palestinian economy: there are currently 532 roadblocks in the West Bank alone, with 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 which was signed between Israel and the PA in 2005⁵⁹. Due to the damaging effects that the status quo has on the Palestinian Territory's 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".⁶⁰

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, it was for a long time taken for granted that the Eastern European countries were traditionally pro-Arab and pro-Palestinian. The legacy of prolonged business cooperation, as well as of numerous academic scholarships and traineeships, has benefited Poland, in particular, with a good reputation among Palestinians. Furthermore, its lack of a colonial past is perceived as an asset in a region still struggling with the effects of post-colonialism. As a country that fought for freedom 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, ultimately rendering its involvement less problematic in the eyes of Islamist groups. Paradoxically, although Poland's military presence in Iraq has given it relative visibility, it has not put it within the target of Islamist organisations fighting against a renewed imperialism. As for the Palestinian negotiators concentrated on winning over the Americans, along with key European states such as France, UK and Germany, new EU members became of interest only once they explicitly began to pursue a pro-American foreign policy. As such, there is concern that these countries will shift EU policy in favour of Israel. Officials in the Negotiations Affairs Department have asserted that they are now trying to target these particular countries through diplomatic meetings with the representatives' offices in Ramallah, as well as through advocacy tools such as briefings and presentations. There is also an eagerness to travel to new EU member states, especially to countries like Poland, which many recognise 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, and 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 sympathisers. 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 agenda towards projects that generate internal change in perceptions, rather than promote cross-cultural dialogue. Many Palestinians tirelessly repeat that reconciliation is the last stage in a transition from war to peace and cannot therefore come before a peace agree-

Perception of New EU Members

⁵⁸ IPA interview with Palestinian official, Jericho, August 2007.

⁵⁹ OCHA Occupied Palestinian Territory official website, www.ochaopt.org.

⁶⁰ On the other hand, many interviewed Palestinians have said that time works in their favour. A demographic battle is one of the few they can actually 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 is however more predominant among Islamist movements and their supporters, as opposed to within secular circles.

ment and the end of occupation. They see the conflict 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, but rather the creation of a political environment that would then naturally nurture human development and peace.

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 to achieve 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 integrated in a well-thought strategy. They are perceived primarily as numbers that have the power to sway the EU balance towards either side.

In addition, there is doubt among Palestinians of whether new EU member states fully understand the regional dynamics and agendas, as well as the interconnected nature of Middle Eastern conflicts. The rationale is that certain countries with a bigger percentage of Muslim citizens might be more interested in regional dynamics, since they recognise that there exists a relationship between the Palestinian question and broader trans-national Islamist movements – how this relationship is understood or misunderstood is an altogether different issue. Although Palestinian officials 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 so⁶¹. Because of their lack of real power as individual states, new EU members are conceived in terms of pro-Palestinian PR, if at all. Concerning direct negotiations, the PLO and members of the Fatah-led government in the West Bank favour a greater involvement of the EU, but as a unified impartial body that translates its values (grounded in international humanitarian law) into policy, as opposed to as 27 separate and contradictory peace initiatives.

5. The Israeli Narrative and Perceptions of Poland

The 2004 EU enlargement was seen in Israel as a positive step towards a more balanced EU Middle East policy. New Member States are perceived as pro-American, and were thus expected to support the Israeli position. Poland's integration, in particular, was received in Israel with great enthusiasm. Through cooperation with the new EU member states, perceived as more pro-American and pro-Israeli, Israel had the chance to achieve more credibility within the EU, which traditionally did not trust its judgment on Middle Eastern policies⁶².

Despite Poland's efforts 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 to tear down the Wall in the West Bank, and on the other, strongly condemning Palestinian terrorism – 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”⁶³. All Polish governments have led the same policy towards Israel, including the most recent coalition between the rightist “Law and Justice” and populist parties deemed to be anti-Semitic. There seems to be a consensus on policy towards Israel, which has not been revisited even at such critical times 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. Poland is also a very special country to Israel. 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 the Czech Republic, Romania or Hungary, as 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 from 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”⁶⁴.

Poland reveals its support for 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 aimed at bringing the two nations closer together. Indeed, the Polish government has allocated a special fund to the Adam Mickiewicz Cultural Institute to organise a series of events during 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”⁶⁵.

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”⁶⁶. Quoting Israeli officials, Primor from Haaretz argues that “if there is a government in Europe that Israel relies on in times of trouble, it is the Polish one, and that despite the problematic elements in it”, referring to anti-Semitic statements made by 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 scandal in Brussels. Overall, Israel perceives bilateral relations with Poland in strategic terms.

Such statements have 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 large 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 when many were criticising Tel Aviv for its use of excessive and disproportionate force against the Lebanese civilian population. While visiting the region, the President was careful to maintain balance and to treat both conflicted parties equally,

62 IPA Interview with Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jerusalem, August 2007.

63” Szewach Weiss, Rozmowa”, Rzeczpospolita, 11 September 2006.

64 IPA interview with Israeli journalist, Tel Aviv 2007.

65 IPA Interview with Israeli diplomat, Warsaw, August 2007.

66 Primor, Adar, “There is a New Poland”, Haaretz, 15 June 2007.

by remaining within the safety of broad declarations. This was evident during Kaczyński's visit to Ramallah and his 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 although Israel is a friend, Poland can still sympathise with the Palestinians. Political support does not, however, necessarily translate into a greater involvement on the ground, 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 fulfil a role that can be done by a different party"⁶⁷.

Such statements are welcome in Israel, which appears to be more interested in declaratory diplomacy and official Polish positions than in Poland's involvement as an individual actor⁶⁸. Israel did not respond positively to offers coming from Warsaw in 2002-2003 to organise a peace conference in Poland. The PA expressed enthusiasm, most probably due to the reasons explained above: as the weaker party, it sees negotiations and peace as a matter of highest urgency and thus cannot afford to reject help. Yet Israel was more pragmatic and rejected the idea on the premise that it did not promise any added value. It questioned Polish expertise in conflict resolution and its financial resources to organise such an event. As such, the Israeli rationale echoes the Palestinian strategy. While both the PA and Israel realise the potential of individual EU member states, or of separate 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, seeing as the potential to influence their outcome is higher. According to Israeli officials, Poland's role is 'useful' solely as an EU member state with the ability to influence Council Conclusions and ensure that the pro-Palestinian narrative, promoted mostly by Southern⁶⁹ and Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Finland, does not prevail. In other words, Israel is interested in maintaining the status quo. Poland has lived up to Israeli expectations and therefore gained recognition as "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-Palestinian⁷⁰. In addition, Israeli officials believe that Poland can best represent their position regarding Iran's nuclear program and have consequently concentrated their diplomatic efforts on Warsaw.

Another such example is the role that Polish MEPs play in promoting a "balanced policy" towards the conflict. Some even opposed the United Nations International Civil Society Conference, on the on-going occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, held at the European Parliament in late August. Polish MEPs belonging to different parties took a strong stance against the conference and, in fact, supported Israel's efforts to boycott it based on the premise that by focusing on Israel's restrictive measures towards the Palestinian civilian population, its program was completely anti-Israeli and thus counter-productive. Asked about why he would not take part in the conference, MEP Bronisław Geremek argued that it was biased and did not take into consideration the arguments of the other side, and as such suggested that it might organise an equally one-sided counter-conference. 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, MEPs should seek to change the Parliament's image as being completely pro-Palestinian. Hence, Poland and new EU member states are in favour of maintaining a balanced policy towards the conflict: "Polish MEPs have demonstrated in the past that they also understand Israeli arguments. Poles, as well as MEPs from other new member states, are very active in making sure that EU policy towards the Middle East is even-handed – neither pro-Palestinian, nor pro-Israeli"⁷¹.

Poland, like other new EU members, can indeed afford to adopt such a stance because it does not have a colonial past and, as a result, has no moral debt towards the Arab world. As previously discussed, the new EU member states' lack of involvement in the region in the past is also perceived as an asset by the Palestinians, who see this as an opportunity for them to become honest brokers in the eyes of a formerly subjugated Muslim world. For the Israelis, however, it presents a chance to "shake off the heritage of communism and the Eastern bloc's traditionally pro-Arab policies"⁷². The question that should be asked at this point is whether in this case Israel hopes to see Poland become a bigger player in the conflict? More specifically, does it want Poland to become anything more than "its [alleged] ambassador in the EU"?

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

68 IPA Interview with Polish official, Tel Aviv, August 2007.

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

70 IPA Interview with Polish official, Warsaw, August 2007.

71 Geremek Bronisław Interview, "W Unii klimat sprzyja Palestyńczykom", *Rzeczpospolita*, August 2007.

72 Primor, Adar, "There is a New Poland", *Haaretz*, 15 June 2007.

All stakeholders in the Middle East perceive the EU's gradually increasing role in the region. Above all, many interviewees stressed that the EU presents a more neutral and objective stance. Israeli citizens have emphasised its anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian attitude in the past, but currently both sides recognise the EU's intention to maintain a policy of "equal distance". The EU has also initiated programmes for a more efficient monitoring of its funds, especially after reports of corruption within the Palestinian government⁷³ and Israeli allegations of the deviation of funds for terrorist activities at the height of violence in 2002. The EU has begun to lead a more concrete policy towards the Middle East, which is not an easy task, since the EU has no coherent and longstanding common foreign policy. 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".⁷⁴

While observing these changes in the EU stance, many Palestinian interviewees expect it to take further steps in terms of political action. They would like it to assume 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."⁷⁵

In order to become a "player, not a payer", the EU must act as a unified body, taking short-term political decisions that would not undermine its long-term political goals. As was 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 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 – travelled to Beirut, delivering mixed messages"⁷⁶. EU officials in the field seem to agree that both Palestinians and Israelis are confused by a multitude of different initiatives, starting with those promoted by individual member states, there are also those of the European Commissioner for External Relations and Neighbourhood Policy, the EU Special Envoy to the Middle East, and finally, of the EU High Representative Javier Solana. As a divided body, the EU is naturally perceived as less efficient and harder to deal with than the United States for instance. Despite being the largest donor to the PA, and arguably thus "a major subsidiary for the Israeli occupation", it is paradoxically marginalised as a political player. In order to reverse such a perception, the EU should work towards establishing a clear political agenda and a climate that would enable negotiations and a genuine peace process. Arguably, the last thing that the Middle East now needs is a separate peace initiative led by new EU member states, alongside the efforts already undertaken by the Quartet and the Arab League. The joint statement of the Israeli government and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, presented at the Annapolis conference, emphasised once again the importance that both parties place in the United States as regards the negotiations process, seeing as it reconfirmed their commitment to the implementation of the Road Map under American monitoring and guidance⁷⁷.

When it comes to diplomacy, Poland, as well as other new EU member states, should concentrate their diplomatic efforts on supporting a common EU strategy towards the region, in order to create a real window of opportunity for final status negotiations. Only when speaking with one voice can the EU elaborate convincing incentives for peace, involve key regional actors in the process, and perhaps even lead to a reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, a pre-condition for any 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 on the conflict that would force both parties to sit at the negotiating table? All stakeholders – whether it be Israel, the Palestinians, or new EU members – realise that the strength of an EU policy lies in its unified position. Due to competition among member states seeking exposure and pursuing

6. Conclusion and Recommendations: Potential for Bigger Involvement?

⁷³ House of Lords, European Union Committee, "The EU and the Middle East Peace Process", 24 July 2007. Following these allegations, the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) conducted an investigation that looked into the alleged misuse of European funds. The resulting 2005 report concluded that there is no evidence that the EC supported armed attacks by contributions made to the Palestinian budget.

⁷⁴ IPA interview with Israeli journalist, Tel Aviv 2007.

⁷⁵ Ibidem.

⁷⁶ Martti Ahtisaari and Joschka Fischer, "Europe needs to assert itself in the world", Financial Times, 1 October 2007.

⁷⁷ PLO Negotiations Department, "Joint Understanding on Negotiations", Annapolis, Maryland, 27 November 2007, accessed at: www.nad-plo.org.

their own agendas through development aid, there is a cacophony of initiatives that leads to contradictory 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 the total of 700 million euros spent by the EU – it will be able to achieve its long-term goals. Even bigger donors with long established ODA programs, such as France, the UK or Spain, 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 therefore seem solely interested in the greater role of any given country for Public Diplomacy purposes, to change other members' positions and eventually sway the overall balance in their favour. Similarly, while seeking to secure its own interests in the region, Poland appears to be more interested in reaching consensus within the EU than in leading a policy of its own. Therefore, it seems to be agreed that there is no room for any new or old EU member to play a bigger bilateral role.

Recommendations:

- Rather than pursuing its own development initiatives in the Palestinian Territory, Poland should align its assistance with existing and well-established EU programmes in order to achieve a greater overall impact and effectively contribute to the institution-building process. In terms of development aid, it should work in close cooperation with other more experienced EU member states to achieve better coordination.
- In a bid to contribute to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a negotiated peace settlement, Poland, and other new EU member states, should work towards establishing a unified European position, not only in Israel and the Palestinian Territory, but throughout the region. Separate initiatives led by individual member states are confusing to both the Palestinian Authority and Israel, and reinforce the view that the European Union is a less effective body than the United States.

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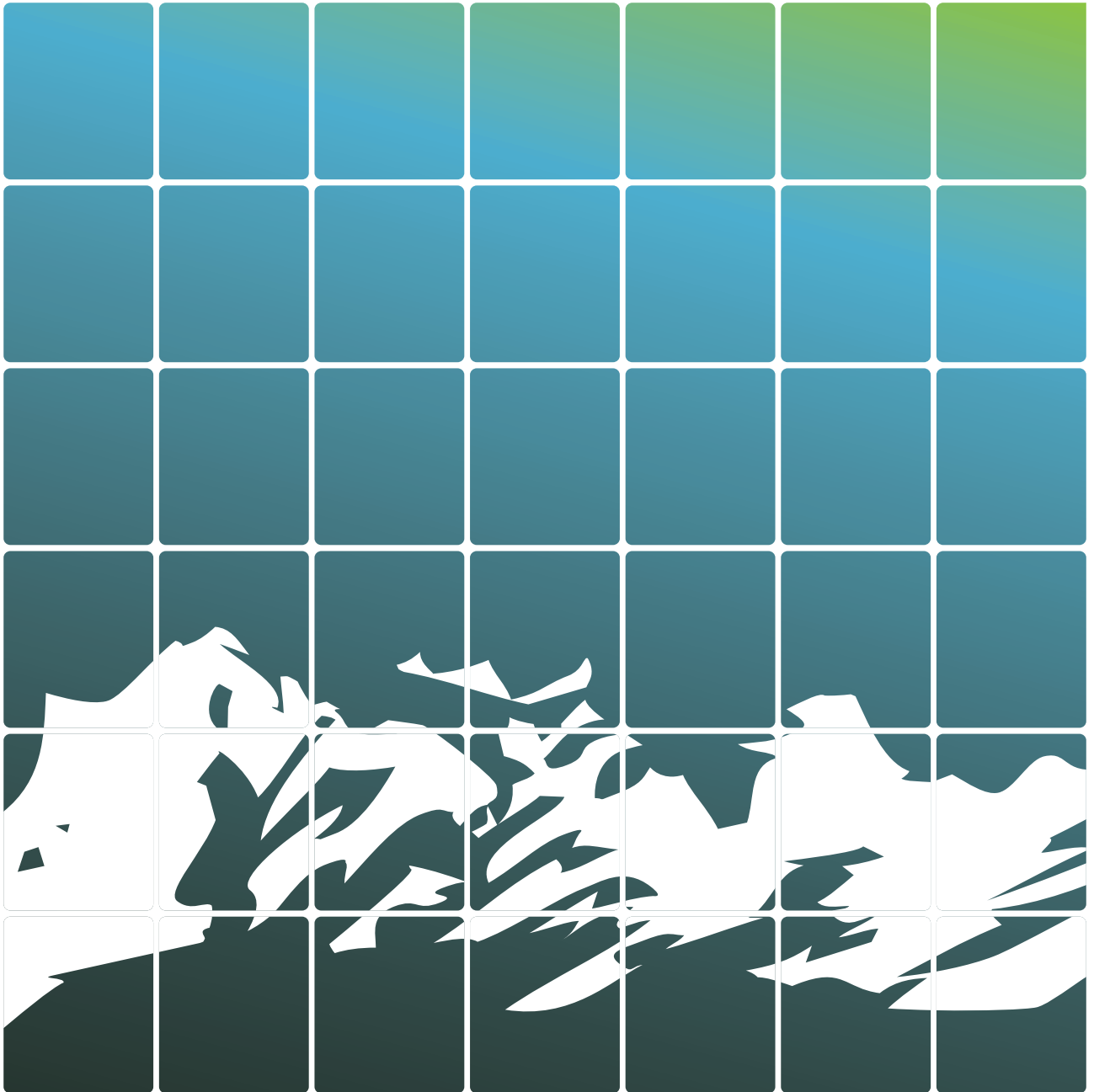
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