

Outcome of the European Council video-conference of 17 October 2023

On 17 October 2023, EU leaders held an extraordinary meeting to address the escalating situation in the Middle East and to unify the messaging of the various EU actors. Building on the EU leaders' joint statement of 15 October, the European Council's President, Charles Michel, emphasised the importance for the European Council of setting a common line and establishing a clear and unified course of action. At the meeting, EU leaders identified four strands of action to guide the work of EU foreign ministers. Given the rapidly evolving nature of the conflict and its importance for regional, EU and international security, the leaders are likely to return to the issue at the next European Council meeting, on 26-27 October 2023.

1. Background

On 7 October, Hamas militants launched a terrorist attack on Jewish settlers close to the Gaza Strip, killing at least [1 300 people](#) and taking roughly 200 hostages. The recent escalation of Israeli-Palestinian violence is the most recent chapter in a [longstanding and often violent conflict](#).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been a subject of the EU's foreign policy debates for decades. Member States signed the [Venice Declaration](#) in 1980, recognising both Israel's right to live in peace and security, and the Palestinians' right to self-determination. Since then, the EU has continually reiterated its commitment to a two-state solution – with an independent Palestine and Israel co-existing peacefully. In its most recent resolution dated 12 July 2023, the European Parliament adopted a [set of recommendations](#) on how the EU should continue to engage with the Palestinian Authority. Members (MEPs) recommended in particular that the EU should 'reiterate [its] unwavering support for the two-state solution, as the only viable solution to the conflict, with the state of Israel and the state of Palestine living democratically side by side in peace, complete with guaranteed security, mutual recognition under the 1967 borders, mutually agreed-upon equivalent land swaps and Jerusalem as the capital of both states, based on the parameters in the [Council conclusions](#) of July 2014'.

Given the urgent need for EU leaders to discuss the evolving situation in the Middle East, Michel called an extraordinary meeting via video-conference, to maximise EU leaders' participation. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was the only EU leader not to participate, owing to a pre-planned trip to China; he was represented by the Austrian Chancellor. This was the European Council's first video-conference since March 2021, during the pandemic.

2. Initial reactions of the EU and the international community

European Commission

On Thursday 10 October, the High Representative/Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP), Josep Borrell, made a [statement](#) condemning the attacks perpetrated in Israel by Hamas, calling for an immediate cessation of 'attacks and violence', and also stating that the EU stood in solidarity with



Israel and that Israel had the right to defend itself in line with international law. The following day, the College of Commissioners held a [minute's silence](#) for the victims of the terrorist attack.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was [criticised](#) by [some Member States](#) and MEPs, both for undertaking a [trip to Israel on 13 October](#) without prior consultation, and because [the statement](#) she made during her visit emphasised Israel's right and 'duty' to defend itself, without calling for Israel to uphold international law. The Irish President [criticised](#) her publicly, 'I don't know where the source of those decisions was. I don't know where the legitimation for it was and I don't know where the authority for it is and I don't think it was helpful'. He called for 'better performance in relation to European Union diplomacy and practice'.

The criticism follows the disjointed Commission messaging on the provision of aid to Palestinians, with Neighbourhood and Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi first [announcing](#) that all payments were under review. Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarčič then clarified that humanitarian aid to Palestinians would continue. A formal [statement](#) by the Commission was issued later that day underlining that the deployment of humanitarian aid would not be impacted. The Commission spokesperson [confirmed](#) that Várhelyi's comments had not been preceded by consultations with any other member of the College.

European Parliament

On 11 October, the European Parliament held a moment of remembrance for the victims of the Hamas attacks in Israel. In her [statement](#), Parliament's President, Roberta Metsola, expressed solidarity with the Israeli people, condemned 'the appalling acts of terror and murder', and demanded the immediate release of the hostages. She stated that Hamas was a terrorist organisation and separate from the 'legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people'. In a strong show of support for Israel, Metsola went to Israel at the [invitation](#) of the Israeli Parliament to express solidarity and to reiterate Parliament's rejection of terrorism. When Metsola [opened](#) the 16-19 October plenary session, she immediately addressed the situation in Israel and Gaza, underlining that Hamas was a terrorist organisation that needed to be stopped. She underlined that the focus had to be on ensuring that the hostages were unconditionally released, that humanitarian aid reached those in need and that civilians were not targeted. She signalled her support for continued engagement with the legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people and regional actors to reduce tensions.

The leadership of the biggest political groups in Parliament expressed varying positions on the conflict in advance of the European Council meeting. The Chair of the EPP group, Manfred Weber, has repeated his condemnation of the terrorist attacks carried out by Hamas and his support for Israel. In a [post](#) on Twitter (X), following a meeting with relatives of hostages taken by Hamas, he said, 'We support Israel to do whatever it takes to get the hostages back'. The Chair of the S&D group, Iratxe García Pérez, [said](#) that von der Leyen and Metsola were right to show Europe's solidarity and condemn the Hamas attack. Nevertheless, she felt that they had failed in their duty to represent the position of the Union and its Member States. The Chair of the Renew group, Stéphane Séjourné, [criticised](#) the lack of coherence in the EU's response to the situation in Israel-Palestine; he added that there needed to be a reflection on how the institutions could speak with one voice, and stated that [qualified majority voting](#) in the Council could result in a more consistent approach to foreign policy.

United Nations (UN)

The Secretary-General of the UN, António Guterres, has made [several statements](#) on the situation in Israel and Palestine since the Hamas attack, focusing on the humanitarian situation. Guterres' [statement](#) on 9 October is the closest to the language adopted by EU leaders, albeit referring to Israel's 'security concerns' rather than to the 'right to self-defence', which is the phrasing used by EU leaders. The UN Security Council (UNSC) has thus far been unable to agree on a resolution; a first resolution, proposed by Russia, [did not gain enough votes](#) owing to the lack of an explicit condemnation of Hamas. A second, from Brazil, which called for humanitarian pauses, and condemnation of Hamas and of all terrorist acts against civilians also [failed to be adopted](#).

European Council President and Member States

In a [statement](#) on 15 October, EU Member States jointly condemned the attacks by Hamas against the Israeli people. However, the Member States' responses to the overall conflict varied in the run-up to the meeting. [Some](#) Member States have [placed](#) themselves [firmly](#) behind Israel and its right to self-defence. [Others](#) have [agreed](#) with Israel's right to self-defence but [included](#) the [caveat](#) that Israel's response should be in line with international and humanitarian law; [others](#) meanwhile have been openly critical of the impact that Israel's retaliation and siege of Gaza would have on civilians. The aforementioned confusion regarding EU aid to Palestine also sparked another debate between those wanting EU aid to Palestine to continue or even be increased, and those [concerned](#) that EU aid might benefit Hamas. Prior to the video-conference meeting, [Denmark announced](#) it would send DKK50 million in humanitarian aid to Gaza and the West Bank.

In his first tweet on the conflict, on 7 October, Charles Michel condemned the attacks against Israel and signalled the EU's solidarity with the Israeli people. He attended the [moment of remembrance](#) for the victims of the terrorist attacks in Israel at the European Parliament on 11 October, alongside other EU leaders. In his [invitation letter to EU leaders](#), Michel outlined the importance of the European Council defining a common line and establishing a clear and unified course of action. Given the disjointed response from the Commission regarding aid to Palestinians, the criticism by Member States and MEPs of the visit to Israel and the European Council's [Treaty role](#), the EU needed a common approach that could be communicated by EU leaders; the European Council was the EU institution best placed to take the lead on the response to this conflict.

3. European Council video-conference: Four strands of action

The meeting began with a minute of silence to honour the innocent victims who had lost their lives in Israel and in Palestine, as well as the victims of recent terror attacks perpetrated in Europe. Michel outlined the two guiding pillars to the European Council's approach – unity and coherence. This joint approach was an answer to the criticism according to which the EU had been disjointed in its response to the situation in Israel and Palestine. He referred again to the points made in the European Council statement issued the previous Sunday and supported by all Member States, which included a condemnation of the Hamas terrorist attacks, the recognition of Israel's right to defend itself while upholding international law, and also the EU's commitment to a two-state solution.

In order to ensure EU unity and coherence, the European Council has tasked EU foreign ministers and ambassadors with carrying out work in a coordinated manner across four strands of action.

Humanitarian assistance: Before the latest escalation in the conflict, the EU was already the biggest donor of [aid](#) to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The [humanitarian situation](#) on the ground in Gaza is dire. On humanitarian aid, several areas for action were outlined: i) coordinate with the UN to ensure that people in need have access to basic necessities; ii) work with those trying to clarify the status of the hostages and mediate their complete and immediate and unconditional release; iii) work with international partners to evacuate foreign citizens from Gaza. Ursula von der Leyen confirmed that the EU had created an air-bridge to Egypt near the Gaza border with staff on the ground ready for the quick transfer of humanitarian aid. The grave situation was clearly demonstrated when news came through during the meeting that a hospital in Gaza had been bombed, resulting in numerous casualties. When asked about this during the press conference, Michel confirmed that targeting civilian infrastructures was 'not in line with international law'. With regard to the previously mentioned concerns of some Member States that EU aid could benefit Hamas, von der Leyen stated that the Commission was not aware of any EU funding going to any terrorist organisations. She noted that there would be an internal review of aid and that the Commission would coordinate with any Member States who were carrying out their own reviews. The Commission [announced](#) that the EU would triple humanitarian aid to Palestine for this year.

Engagement with partners: The European Council reiterated its support for the two-state solution as the best basis for achieving sustainable peace, committing to continue to engage politically and diplomatically with regional partners. The two main objectives of this strand of action are: i) to avoid

further escalation in the region, which would have dangerous knock-on effects for the region and the world (this would be all the more problematic as Ukraine, the EU's direct neighbour, is already at war); and ii) assess the impact of the war on countries neighbouring the conflict area (Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon). The conflict could have destabilising effects on their populations.

Domestic security issues: The conflict has divided communities globally. [Protestors](#) on [both sides](#), have been taking to the streets around the world. European society has not been immune to this division and polarisation. The recent terror attacks in [Brussels](#) (which occurred the evening before the video-conference) and in [France](#), may have underlined the security risks relating to hate speech and societal fragmentation, as all were fuelled by hate. EU leaders agreed that there needs to be collaboration at EU level to defuse tensions, fight all forms of hate speech and strengthen cooperation between Member States' security services to mitigate further security risks.

Migration: The backdrop of the terrorist attack in Brussels was also relevant for the discussion on migration. A radicalised migrant, living illegally in Belgium, was responsible for the attack, which resulted in the deaths of two Swedish nationals. [Before](#) the European Council video-conference, the Swedish Prime Minister said he expected a continuation of the discussions on migration, notably on the need for better control of the EU's external borders and over people entering the EU. Migration has recently returned to the European Council agenda and has been a topic on which EU Member States have [struggled](#) to find complete agreement. At its video-meeting, the European Council discussed how the conflict in the Middle East could have an impact on migratory flows to the EU as well as to neighbouring countries, notably Egypt. In his press conference, Michel noted that, if migration flows were not managed, this could lead to onward migration flows to the EU. The countries neighbouring the conflict zone are already home to [millions](#) of [refugees](#), fleeing other conflicts and political instability in the region. According to Michel, the Arab Republic of Egypt is reluctant to open the border with Gaza, as it does not want to be responsible for thousands more refugees; this factor is making it difficult to get aid into Gaza.

Although the extraordinary European Council meeting was aimed primarily at discussing the situation in the Middle East, both Michel and von der Leyen reiterated their unwavering support for Ukraine for 'as long as it is needed'. Assistance to Ukraine, notably financial support, is due to be discussed by EU leaders at their meeting on 26-27 October. Ahead of that meeting, the Foreign Affairs Council will meet on 23 October to act on the strands of action set out by EU leaders at their video-meeting on 17 October and to prepare for the 26-27 October European Council meeting.

Main [message](#) of the President of the European Parliament: Roberta Metsola stressed the importance of remaining coherent and united in ensuring the release of hostages, in refusing to excuse terrorism in any form, and in finding solutions that mitigate the humanitarian consequences in Gaza 'in line with our obligations and international law'.

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