

## EYE ON EUROPE

## Pushback in Brussels against top EU officials showing strong support for Israel

*The European Union flip-flops on cutting aid to the Palestinians, as European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Parliament President Roberta Metsola pay a solidarity visit to Israel*



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*EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen arrives for the Third Meeting Of The European Political Community on October 5, 2023 in Granada, Spain.*

By [Lahav Harkov](#) · October 16, 2023

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Hamas' bloody rampage in southern Israel is exposing deep fault lines among European Union leaders, as a call to cut off funding to the Palestinians and shows of support for Israel were met with fierce push-back. The situation became further muddled on Saturday when European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen made a solidarity visit to Israel, and announced a day after that the group she leads will triple its humanitarian aid to Gaza.

All of it has left EU funding for the Palestinians an open question, and the internal debate — including a review of such aid — is being met with incredulity by non-government organizations working to strengthen Europe-Israel relations.

Emmanuel Navon, CEO of ELNET, one such NGO, told *Jewish Insider*: “How can you possibly review and monitor where the money is going when it’s being spent by Hamas?... Hamas is not a European country that honestly fills out forms pledging the money will only go to hospitals and writes reports. Any money to the Gaza strip is controlled by Hamas.”

The dustup began last week with a series of tweets.

“As the biggest donor of the Palestinians, the European Commission is putting its full development portfolio under review, worth a total of EUR 691m,” European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Oliver Varhelyi tweeted last Monday. “All payments immediately suspended. All projects put under review. All new budget proposals, [including] for 2023 postponed until further notice. Comprehensive assessment of the whole portfolio.”

“The foundations for peace, tolerance and coexistence must now be addressed. Incitement to hatred, violence and glorification of terror have poisoned the minds of too many. We need action and we need it now,” the Hungarian diplomat said.

Varhelyi's statement set off a firestorm in Brussels that has European commissioners squabbling about cutting aid to the Palestinians while also pledging to increase it, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen facing criticism for being too pro-Israel, after she paid a solidarity visit without doing the usual throat-clearing about international law.

There were 34 citizens of EU member states missing in Israel as of Saturday night, and another

34 killed by Hamas.

A source in Brussels with knowledge of what unfolded behind the scenes told JI that von der Leyen supported Varhelyri's pro-Israel announcement. IMPACT-se, an Israeli organization that lobbies the EU to cut funding for Palestinian textbooks that incite violence against Israel and Jews, said in a statement that it heard from officials that "the funding freeze has the full backing of...von der Leyen."

However, Josep Borrell, the EU's high representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, challenged Varhelyri's announcement, saying that the "overwhelming majority" of EU states opposed cutting aid to the Palestinians and put Israel on notice, saying that its defense "has to be done accordingly with international law, humanitarian law, and some decisions are contrary to international law."

At the same time, Borrell said that the EU would conduct a review of its funding sent to Gaza, to ensure there is no "leakage" to Hamas, which has governed the enclave since 2006.

Among the EU member states protesting the suspension of aid were Spain, Ireland, Luxembourg and Belgium. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called European Council President Charles Michel to ask him not to freeze funding to the Palestinians.

An individual familiar with the disagreements in Brussels said Borrell was angry that Varhelyi tweeted out the plan, but that the public announcement was likely an attempt to box in the EU's top diplomat.

"Varhelyi went ahead without coordinating with member states because he knew that if he did, there would always be enough to block it," the source said. EU foreign policy decisions are made by consensus.

Six hours after Varhelyi's announcement, the European Commission announced that it will start "an urgent review of the EU's assistance for Palestine," without an actual funding freeze.

For her part, von der Leyen made a lengthy statement on the occasion of a moment of silence with the Israeli ambassador to the EU last week. The European Commission president said "it is important that we carefully review our financial assistance for Palestine. EU funding has never

and will never go to Hamas or any terrorist entity. So we will now again review the entire portfolio in light of an evolving situation on the ground.”

Von der Leyen even said the EU “will also have to monitor Iran’s posture closely, given its long-standing support to Hamas.”

Varhelyi told *The Financial Times* later last week that the statements do not contradict what he said about a freeze because a review means “there are no imminent payments.”

Then, on Saturday, von der Leyen announced that the European Commission will triple its humanitarian aid to Gaza, bringing it to over 75 million Euros.

Amid the muddled messaging from Brussels, Michel called a video conference of the European Council for Wednesday to ensure that it “sets our common position and establishes a clear unified course of action that reflects the complexity of the unfolding situation.”

The council president condemned Hamas terrorism and said the EU stands “in full solidarity with the people of Israel” and asserted its “right to defend itself in full compliance with international law.”

He also warned of security consequences for Europe, as well as the risk of migrant waves.

Israel was displeased with the tenor of the debate in the EU’s top circles.

“The concern of some organizations and researchers in the Brussels Bubble for a ‘EU common position’ while more than 1,300 innocent civilians were butchered, raped, beheaded, burnt and kidnapped is absurd (to say the least). You need to recalibrate your moral compass,” Israel’s deputy chief of mission to the EU and NATO, Jonathan Rosenzweig, posted on X.

Navon called the back-and-forth about the funds “power struggle politics” and said “there’s an agreement today that they aren’t saying they will stop everything immediately, but obviously they understand the money has been used by Hamas.”

At the same time, Navon called the debate “academic,” because “hopefully after we get rid of Hamas and [the world] talks about how to rebuild the Gaza Strip and which government it will have, they will build a strong system of monitoring where the money is going.”

Navon argued that Borrell did not want to look like he was taking sides between Israel and the Palestinians, and the EU did not want to be perceived as collectively punishing all Palestinians.

“I think that [Borrell] agrees that the way the money is spent has to be better monitored and they haven’t met the basic requirements until now,” Navon added.

Whether or not von der Leyen gave Varheyl a green light, she and European Parliament President Roberta Metsola visited Israel on Friday, showing unequivocal solidarity with the Jewish state.

The politicians visited Kfar Azza, where Hamas terrorists murdered dozens of Israelis, including children and babies, some beheaded, as confirmed by a Prime Minister’s Office spokesperson, based on soldiers’ testimonies.

Standing next to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Tel Aviv, von der Leyen said that “Europe stands with Israel and Israel has the right to defend itself — in fact it has the duty to defend itself.”

Metsola posted on X: “Terror will not prevail. How we respond matters. We can — we must — stop Hamas. And do what we can to mitigate humanitarian consequences.”

But an anonymous diplomat quoted in *Politico* shows what von der Leyen is up against in Brussels, where even the simplest expression of support for Israel is viewed as highly controversial: “She simply said Israel has the right to defend itself, full stop. That is not the line member states agreed.”

The chairwoman of the European Parliament Security and Defense Committee, Nathalie Loiseau, posted on X after the leaders’ visit to Israel that “we are friends of Israel and we support the Israeli people in their ordeal” but that she was “forgetting an important message: Israel must respect international humanitarian law.”

The director of the American Jewish Committee’s Transatlantic Institute, Daniel Schwammenthal, told JI that it was “enormous to see this kind of solidarity from the EU, specifically from Commission President von der Leyen and Parliament President Metsola. These were not just words, but they came immediately to Israel to bear witness to the biggest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust.

“The EU leadership is showing great resolve, solidarity, and moral clarity,” he added.

Navon said von der Leyen’s “attitude is unheard of for a president of the European Commission... It goes to show that they were really horrified in the visit. I think that, as a German, she has a special attitude towards Jews and the memory of the Holocaust, and ELNET has brought Metsola to Israel a number of times; she made a very friendly speech to the Knesset and is very pro-Israel.”

“ Hamas managed to do something in terms of foreign relations — I don’t think they expected such support for Israel worldwide, especially in Europe,” Navon said.

Meanwhile, many EU member states are not waiting for a cue from Brussels before freezing or reconsidering their aid to the Palestinians.

Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg announced that Vienna would suspend \$20 million for the Palestinians, and the Israeli flag flew over the chancellor’s office.

Copenhagen said that it “decided to put Danish development assistance to Palestine on hold” pending “a thorough review...to ensure that no Danish funding is misused to indirectly support terrorist organizations that attack Israel.” Denmark had earmarked the equivalent of \$33.5 million for the Palestinians for 2023, and less of a third remained to be disbursed.

Sweden also said it would suspend its aid to the Palestinians, saying it “unreservedly condemns the attacks on Israel carried out by the terrorist organization Hamas.”

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said that Germany is “once again scrutinizing not only our development cooperation but also our humanitarian assistance, in close consultation with the United Nations.”

At the same time, she said, “it would be quite wrong at this point in time to halt vital humanitarian assistance for the civilian population.”