

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EUROPEAN UNION IN THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS: PLAYER OR PAYER?<sup>1</sup>

ORTADOĞU BARIŞ SÜRECİNDE AVRUPA BİRLİĞİ'NİN ÖNEMİ: OYUN KURUCU  
MU BORÇLU MU?

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### ABSTRACT

“Peace in the Middle East is a vital interest of the European Union. Accordingly, the European Union is ready to play an active part in efforts to recommence the negotiations, commensurate with its interests in the region, and on the basis of its major contribution to the Peace Process so far”. These sentences were declared by the European Union about the Middle East Peace Process in October 1996. This study will focus to explain the role of the European Union in the Middle East Peace Process during the second half of twentieth century. The role of EU in Middle East has become highly problematic issue in terms of peace process. This paper aims to explore EU’s role during the Middle East Peace Process during the second half of twentieth century and to find an answer why EU was an inefficient to solve this conflict. This paper claims that, EU was not a real player during this period due to several reasons. EU played an important role for supporting financial and diplomatic aid for solving these problems in this area. However, the reality of United States’ influence, the power of US in the Middle East, the lack of unanimity in European Union about Middle East Peace Process, Israel’s uncompromising attitude on the attempts of European Union for peace process, 11 September 2001 attacks and other terrorist attacks on some European countries has damaged the peace process and decreased Europe’s influence for conflict prevention. Indeed, this paper will try to clarify these factors to understand why EU is a payer but not a player in Middle East.

**Keywords:** Middle East Peace Process, European Union, United States, Israel, 11 September 2011

### ÖZET

“Ortadoğu’da barış, Avrupa Birliği’nin hayati bir çıkarıdır. Birlik, bölgedeki çıkarlarıyla orantılı olarak ve Barış Sürecine şimdiye kadarki en büyük katkısı temelinde, müzakerelerin yeniden başlatılması çabalarında aktif rol oynamaya hazırdır”. Bu cümleler Avrupa Birliği tarafından Ekim 1996’da Ortadoğu Barış Süreci ile ilgili olarak ilan edilmişti. Bu çalışma, Avrupa Birliği’nin yirminci yüzyılın ikinci yarısında Ortadoğu Barış Sürecindeki rolünü açıklamaya odaklanacaktır. AB’nin Ortadoğu’daki rolü, barış süreci açısından oldukça sorunlu bir konu haline gelmiştir. Bu makale, yirminci yüzyılın ikinci yarısında Ortadoğu Barış Sürecinde AB’nin rolünü araştırmayı ve AB’nin bu çatışmayı çözmek için neden yetersiz kaldığına bir cevap bulmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu makale, AB’nin bu dönemde çeşitli nedenlerle gerçek bir oyuncu olmadığını iddia etmektedir. AB, bu alandaki bu sorunların çözümüne yönelik mali ve diplomatik yardımların desteklenmesinde önemli bir rol oynamıştır. Ancak ABD’nin etkisi gerçeği, ABD’nin Ortadoğu’daki gücü, Avrupa Birliği’nde Ortadoğu Barış Süreci konusunda fikir birliğinin olmaması, İsrail’in Avrupa Birliği’nin barış süreci girişimlerine karşı tavizsiz tutumu, 11 Eylül 2001 saldırıları ve bazı Avrupa ülkelerine yönelik diğer terörist saldırılar barış sürecine zarar verdi ve Avrupa’nın çatışma

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önleme üzerindeki etkisini azalttı. Bu çalışma, AB'nin neden Ortadoğu'da oyun kurucu olmadığını anlamak için bu faktörleri açıklığa kavuşturmaya çalışacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, Avrupa Birliği, İsrail, Ortadoğu Barış Süreci, 11 Eylül 2001,

## INTRODUCTION

“Peace in the Middle East is a vital interest of the European Union. Accordingly, the European Union is ready to play an active part in efforts to recommence the negotiations, commensurate with its interests in the region, and on the basis of its major contribution to the Peace Process so far” (Declaration by the European Union on the Peace Process, 1996). These sentences were declared by the European Union about the Middle East Peace Process in October 1996. This study will focus to explain the role of the European Union in the Middle East Peace Process during the second half of twentieth century.

The Middle East region has been an important region for the European Union (EU) due to its geographical proximity to Europe, its vital importance for Europe's energy security, and the special ties of important European countries such as United Kingdom and France stemming from their colonial past to the region. First, the geographical proximity of the region to Europe and the potential for instability and insecurity that may arise in the region to negatively affect the stability and security of Europe. In particular, the rise of radical Islamic movements that may emerge in the region, terrorism and illegal immigration are seen as important security threats by the EU. Secondly, European countries are dependent on natural energy resources in the Middle East and therefore they perceive any instability that will interrupt the transportation of natural energy resources such as oil and natural gas from the region to Europe as a threat to their energy security. Third, the special relations of the former colonial powers in the region such as United Kingdom and France with increase of the EU's interest in the region. Especially after the establishment of the European Political Cooperation, the Arab-Israeli Conflict and the Middle East Peace Process that followed have become one of the most important issues occupying the EU foreign policy agenda.

Although Europe played an important role the Middle East peace-making process in the 1990s, its interest in peace in the Middle East is not new. The first attempt by member states of the EU was realised in the early 1970s during the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Arab-Israeli Conflict has been identified in the 'European Security Strategy' as a strategic priority of Europe that should contribute to its resolution with all its resources. Besides, the issue is described by EU officials as the 'mother' of all conflicts in the Middle East. In other words, it is perceived as a strategic threat to the security of the Middle East, on which the resolution of all other disputes directly depends.

European Political Cooperation (EPC), which was established by 6 members of the European Countries in Munich 1970, included the conjuncture in the region which was the first matter in Europe's agenda (Monar, 2000). Musu explained it as below;

“When the Six Day War broke out in June 1967 the EC collective foreign policy was non-existent. The six EC members had diverging views on the Arab-Israeli conflict and their national interests were too different. This war clearly demonstrated the impotence of the EC members with regard to coordinating their foreign policy and the fact that they could not come together in such a vital question became a stimulus to the evolution of a European foreign policy” (Musu, 2007).

Although the EPC was the first step toward the Middle East peace process, the EC did not play a more important role during this time due to member states' national interests. France is a good example, because they supported Arab forces and condemned Israel because of the relationship between these countries during the period (Allen&Hauri, 2008).

The main purpose of this study is to examine and demonstrate the ineffective role of the European Union member states in the Middle East peace process. In this direction, the agreements and documents signed in the historical process are the basic data collection methods. In addition, public statements of policy-making actors are another data collection tool. These data are examined with the content analysis and prove why the European Union cannot be a player in the Middle East Peace Process.

## **1.EU'S FIRST ATTEMPTS FOR THE PEACE IN MIDDLE EAST IN THE 1980'S**

In 1979, Egypt-Israel disagreement and tension was finished by Camp David Accords, which were signed by the Egypt and Israel on 17 September 1978. There were two agreements: "A Framework for Peace in the Middle East" and "A Framework for the Conclusion of a Peace Treaty between Egypt and Israel". "After the negotiations between Egypt and Israel in March 1979, Europe wanted to act a more vital role in the Arab-Israel conflict and the Palestinian problem" (Mueller, 2013, pp. 20-35). "The European Economic Community established the Venice Declaration of June 1980, which called for the acknowledgment of the Palestinians' right to self-govern and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation's (PLO) right to be connected to peace initiatives" (Peters, 2000, pp. 150-171). EC member states promised that they would play a specific role towards peaceful environment in the Middle East. Two important principles should be accepted by the international community with this declaration, as can be seen below:

"On the bases thus set out, the time has come to promote the recognition and implementation of the two principles universally accepted by the international community: the right to existence and to security of all the states in the region, including Israel, and justice for all the peoples, which implies the recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people" (Venice Declaration, 1980).

The Venice Declaration was one of the most crucial documents regarding the relations between Europe and the Middle East, because European foreign policy has identified with this declaration for the last twenty years (Peters, 2000). However, the impact of the Venice Declaration and EPC failed to keep peace during the 1980s. There were some reasons behind why Europe's peace initiative failed during this period. Firstly, Israel did not accept the notion of a European role in the peace process. According to the Venice Declaration (1980), "the Nine stress that they will not accept any unilateral initiative designed to change the status of Jerusalem". EC member states disagreed to change the status of Jerusalem but Israel claimed that, "united Jerusalem" was its capital city and they invaded the Golan Heights one year later after the Venice Declaration. Second, the United States' inaction policy in the Middle East Peace Process in the 1980s negatively affected Europe's role. Under the Reagan administration (1981-89), the Arab-Israeli conflict was not the most important foreign policy issue for the United States (Peters, 2000). Ronald Reagan was against the European influence in the Middle East, as former president Carter had been. Another reason for the absence of any European influence was the new French president, François Mitterrand. Mitterrand believed that France should be active in the region and a collective policy made by other European members could not contribute to this process (Allen and Hauri, 2008). As a result of these developments, the Venice process and EPC actions ended in 1982 with the invasion of Lebanon by Israel. During in the 1980's, France and the USA played more prominent roles instead of other European states. Allen and Hauri (2008, p. 101) explained this phenomenon as follows:

"... the EC-Ten gradually vanished from Middle East diplomacy as the Lebanon War began to dominate the scene. National rather than European actions and initiatives were now in the forefront, with enhanced Franco-US cooperation during the Lebanon crisis and French, US and Italian peacekeepers supervising the evacuation of the PLO from Beirut".

## **2.AFTER THE COLD WAR PERIOD**

The end of the Cold War took a chance to provide a new political structure in the Middle East. The European Union played a more active role during the 1990s rather than the 1970s and 80s. This role can be divided into two time periods as the first half of the 1990s and the second half of the 1990s (Müller and Spencer, 2008). The first attempt at peacekeeping in the Middle East was the Madrid Conference in 1991. "This Conference was hosted by the government of Spain and was co-sponsored by the USA and the USSR. It convened on October 30, 1991 and lasted for three days. It was an early step by the international community to start a peace process through negotiations involving Israel and the Palestinians, as well as Arab countries including Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. It was the last conference held with both the USSR and the US present" (Khatib, 2008). The EC was not one of the organisers in this conference. Altunışık (2008, pp. 106-107) explained that "the EC instead was given a role in multilateral track and became the chair of the Regional Economic Development Working Group (REDWG)." However, this position was not identified as a political, it involved financing the peace process and making a model of regional economic cooperation. The other important development regarding this process was the Oslo Peace Process. "Secret negotiations held in Oslo between members of the PLO and the Israeli government led to mutual recognition in September 1993. The PLO and Israel then started a process of bilateral negotiations that were supposed to bring a definitive solution in the long-term to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, the Oslo Agreement was signed in Washington on 13

September 1993” (Altunışık, 2008, p. 110). Nevertheless, the EU did not play an important role during the Oslo Process in comparison with the United States (Müller&Spencer, 2008).

Indeed, the clearest sign of Europe’s influence started during the second half of the 1990s. Peters (2000, pp. 150-171) demonstrates three particular areas of European Union activity in the Middle East Peace Process: “the role of the European special envoy to the peace process, support for the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian institution building, the multilateral talks and the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, which demonstrated European engagement at the regional level.”

### **3.BARCELONA DECLARATION**

Before the Special European Envoy to the Middle East Peace Process, the first important step for the EU was the Barcelona Peace Process in November 1995. “The Barcelona Process was launched in November 1995 by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the then 15 EU members and 14 Mediterranean partners, as the framework to manage both bilateral and regional relations This was based on the principles of joint ownership, dialogue and co-operation, seeking to create a Mediterranean region of peace, security and shared prosperity” (Altunışık, 2008, p. 108). According the Barcelona Declaration which was published after the Barcelona Process; “The participants support the realisation of a just, comprehensive and lasting peace settlement in the Middle East based on the relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions and principles mentioned in the letter of invitation to the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference, including the principle land for peace” (Barcelona Declaration, 1995). Moreover, the European Union declared some agreements with Israel and Palestine within the Barcelona framework. Müller and Spencer (2008) suggest that this agreement had a great economic significance for the EU in terms of the Israeli economy and Europe permitted Israel’s participation in the EU’s research and development programs with these agreements. However, the Barcelona Peace Process was an inefficient development due to the unsuccessful attempts like Oslo and some political crises in the region, like Israel’s air raid in Lebanon in 1996.

Another important development was the “Special European Envoy to the Middle East Peace Process” which was prepared by Miguel Moratinos in November 1996. Peters (2000) summarizes the European Special Envoy as five points: “to establish close contact with all actors like parties, other countries, the US etc. for the peace process; to sight peace negotiations between parties and to offer the European Union’s solutions to these parties; to promote the implementation of international agreements between parties and to connect with them diplomatically in terms of these agreements; to engage with the signatories in agreements within the peace process framework in order to contribute respect for human rights and basic norms of democracy; and to monitor actions by either side which might prejudice the outcome of permanent status negotiations.” The European Special Envoy helped the EU move towards playing a more prominent role in the peace process. European policy for the Middle East became more flexible and responsive with this special envoy. Nevertheless, Israel’s disagreement with this envoy and the American lack of enthusiasm limited the importance of the European Special Envoy for the peace process (Soetendorp, 2002). Another reason for the failure of Moratinos Mission was the French position or lack of European unity, because France wanted to become independent from the EU impact on this process (Alpher, 2000). As mentioned before, France continued a good relationship with Arab countries in the Middle East, and Israel criticised France’s role in this area most of the time. For instance, Alpher (2000) gives an example that, when French President Chirac visited the Middle East in October 1996, Israel tried to prevent him from making contact with Palestinians in Jerusalem.

Another important contribution of the EU was financial support for the Palestine. EU was one of the biggest donors with an aid package to the Palestinian population. Peters (2000) explains three complementary areas which were focused on by Europe: “short-term aid focusing on projects in the field of housing; micro-credit and the assistance of small scale businesses and education; medium-term aid aimed at improving the economic and social infrastructure of the Palestinian territories; and the provision of financial support for the development of Palestinian institution building” (Peters, 2000, p. 163). Additionally, the Euro-Mediterranean Interim Association was published by the European Union with the agreement between the Union and Palestine. The agreement provided the financial position of Palestine and supported the development of Palestinian industries. Nevertheless, new Camp David talks between two sides failed and the second Intifada started in Palestine. There were a number of causes of these developments.

### **4.THE COLLAPSE OF EU’S EFFORTS TO THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS**

Alpher (2000) tries to find an answer regarding why the EU is not efficient and why Israel does not accept the EU’s role in the peace process in the Middle East. Firstly, member states did not behave with unanimity during

this process. For instance, on the one hand, under President Chirac, France launched a new policy with the Arab countries and supported them against Israel. On the other hand, countries like Germany and the United Kingdom supported without any strings attached. Secondly, Europe's impact has not been effective in the Middle East Peace Process in comparison with the United States (US). Although the EU behaves like a powerful actor in this issue, the US felt that they have to get the last word during this period. Another reason for the inefficiency of the European Union was the Muslim population in Europe. Some member states were concerned about getting a reaction from Muslim people in Europe. Moreover, the EU enlargement process with Muslim countries like Albania, Bosnia and Turkey has affected the European Union's policies in the Middle East (Dagci, 2007).

After the collapse of peace process at the end of the 1990's, the new attempts were started by EU's High Representative Javier Solana. Sharm al Sheik and Taba agreement was signed by other actors with the impact of Solana's diplomatic activity. However, these attempts failed due to violence between two sides in the West Bank and Gaza (Benli, 2008). Moreover, 11 September 2001 attacks changed most of the policies in terms of peace process (Youngs, 2006). Israel under the Ariel Sharon government tried to solve this problem as a "war on terror" which was defined by United States after the 9/11. Despite these limitations, EU attempted to solve this conflict during the first half of the 2000's. European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) which was an important topic of the CFSP pillar, played a prominent role during this period. The most significant development was an agreement between Israel and Palestine as "Agreement on Movement and Access" which included principles for Rafah crossing with the attempts of EU. Benli (2008, p. 112) said that; "Israel for the first time accepted a third-party role that included a military involvement and also allowed the EU to play that role". Nevertheless, these developments were cut by Hamas victory in Palestine election in 2006. Hamas was a radical Islamic part in Palestine and EU rejected dialogue with the Hamas.

## CONCLUSION

The role of the EU, which started to be involved in the Arab-Israeli Conflict since the early 1970s, was limited to the declarations it published and the financial aid it made to Palestine. During this period, the EU remained in the shadow of the USA, which was the main actor in the resolution of the dispute, and played a secondary role. While the EU played an important role in the economic and multilateral dimension of the peace process that started in the 1990s, it was excluded from the political and diplomatic dimensions (Khaliq, 2008). However, since the second half of the 1990's, the role of the EU in the political and diplomatic dimensions of the process started to increase, and by the 2000s, the EU started to be seen as an important actor in the political, diplomatic and security dimensions of the process. However, the EU failed to be a dominant actor in the process and continued to be a secondary actor overshadowed by the USA. Although the EU has gone beyond the modest role it played before by increasing its role in the political, diplomatic, economic and security dimensions of the peace process, it still cannot play a strong and active political role in the process.

This study tries to explain EU's role during the Middle East Peace Process and to find an answer why EU was an inefficient to solve this conflict. It is clear that, EU was not a real player during this period due to several reasons. EU played an important role for supporting financial and diplomatic aid for solving these problems in this area. However, the reality of United States' influence, the power of US in the Middle East, the lack of unanimity in European Union about Middle East Peace Process, France's new Arab policy and tension between Israel and some European countries, Israel's uncompromising attitude on the attempts of European Union for peace process, 11 September 2001 attacks and other terrorist attacks on some European countries has damaged the peace process and decreased Europe's influence for conflict prevention. This study argues why the European Union, which is still ineffective in the resolution of conflicts in the Middle East, cannot be an effective player by examining the EU's foreign policy history in Middle East.

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