

RECLAIMING OUR SHARED HUMANITY

COUNTERING
POLARISATION AND
DEHUMANISATION
DRIVEN BY THE MIDDLE
EAST CONFLICT

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RECLAIMING OUR SHARED HUMANITY. COUNTERING POLARISATION AND DEHUMANISATION DRIVEN BY THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

Director: Senén Florensa

Editor: Gemma Aubarell

Coordinator: Mariona Rico

Editorial Team: Aida Traidi

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Girona, 20

08010 Barcelona

info@iemed.org

www.iemed.org

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FOREWORD

FOREWORD

Senén Florensa. Executive President,
European Institute of the Mediterranean

The Euro-Mediterranean Civil Society Conference “Reclaiming Our Shared Humanity. Countering Polarisation, Dehumanisation, and Radicalisation driven by the Middle East Conflict” took place in Barcelona in October 2024, at a moment of profound regional and global upheaval. Organised by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) with the support of the European Union’s External Action Service, the conference brought together close to 200 civil society actors, policymakers, and experts from 33 countries across the Euro-Mediterranean region. This publication captures the outcomes and reflections of that critical gathering, which offered not only a space for dialogue, but also a renewed call to action in the face of mounting division and dehumanisation.

For many decades, the Middle East conflict has been a catalyst for waves of radicalisation, cycles of violence, and deeply entrenched narratives of intercommunal hatred. Yet the ongoing escalation since late 2023 has pushed polarisation to unprecedented levels. The rapid diffusion of conflict imagery and rhetoric, amplified by algorithmic social media environments, has fostered the emergence of digital echo chambers that increasingly shape how communities perceive reality. Individuals are exposed to filtered, emotionally charged content that reinforces their prior beliefs, intensifies identity-based grievances, and fosters radically divergent interpretations of unfolding events. What results is not merely a dis-

agreement over facts, but a fragmentation of reality itself — where different communities, whether Jewish, Muslim, Arab or otherwise, operate within incompatible worldviews.

This phenomenon has had particularly destabilising effects across the Euro-Mediterranean region, where the conflict’s reverberations are deeply felt. From heightened community tensions to rising anti-semitism and the dehumanisation of Palestinians — including broader expressions of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim hatred — the consequences are severe and far-reaching. These manifestations of intolerance are often addressed in isolation, if at all, reinforcing their separateness and inadvertently entrenching the very divisions they produce. The growing inability to see the dignity of the “other” — whether that “other” is religious, ethnic, political or ideological — threatens the fundamental values of coexistence, human rights, and democratic pluralism.

In this context, the role of civil society is not only necessary — it is indispensable. Civil society organisations are uniquely placed to confront the fragmentation of narratives and help rebuild shared spaces for dialogue. By advocating for marginalised voices, monitoring human rights abuses, countering hate speech, and fostering intercommunal trust, civil society actors offer practical and principled tools to address the root causes of conflict and exclusion. Their work is critical not only in mitigating the

immediate effects of polarisation, but in sustaining longer-term processes of peacebuilding, justice, and social cohesion.

The role of civil society is not only necessary – it is indispensable. Civil society organisations are uniquely placed to confront the fragmentation of narratives and help rebuild shared spaces for dialogue

The conference reaffirmed that addressing polarisation cannot be separated from addressing the conflict dynamics that fuels it. While a sustainable resolution to the Middle East conflict remains an essential political goal, civil society must act in the meantime to contain the damage being done across societies. The urgency lies in resisting the spread of extremist narratives, rejecting zero-sum logic, and promoting inclusive, solution-oriented frameworks rooted in shared values and mutual recognition. This is especially true across the Euro-Mediterranean region, where internal cohesion is increasingly threatened by external tensions.

To that end, the conference sought to achieve several key objectives: to convene civil society actors for inclusive and fact-based exchanges on the crisis of polarisation; to highlight the dangers of treating antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred as disconnected phenomena; to expose the mechanisms of information manipulation that fuel echo chambers and radicalisation; and to develop cooperative strategies to promote alternative narratives based on dignity, empathy, and coexistence.

Particular attention was given to the transformative potential of women and youth. Their voices, often

marginalised in traditional peace and security dialogues, are vital to building sustainable and inclusive narratives. Women, in particular, are central to community-based peacebuilding processes, while young people represent both those most affected by radicalisation and those best positioned to imagine and implement a new social contract grounded in justice and equity. Gender-sensitive and intergenerational approaches must therefore be embedded in any serious peacebuilding strategy.

Importantly, the conference also drew on the rich historical legacy of the Mediterranean as both a site of conflict and a cradle of coexistence. The exhibition inaugurated a few months earlier at the Saló del Tinell in Barcelona – featuring the photographic archive of Bonaventura Ubach – offered a poignant reminder of the region's plural heritage. His early twentieth-century images of Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Egypt document a time when diverse religious and ethnic communities coexisted in complex, yet deeply rooted ways. This memory challenges today's narratives of inescapable antagonism and instead affirms the possibility – and historical reality – of shared life across difference.

Resisting the spread of extremist narratives, rejecting zero-sum logic, and promoting inclusive, solution-oriented frameworks rooted in shared values and mutual recognition

The Euro-Mediterranean framework remains uniquely positioned to uphold this vision. Born from the 1995 Barcelona Declaration, it has long served as a platform for dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding across the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. As we approach the 30th anniversary of that landmark declaration

in 2025, the stakes could not be higher. This conference, and the reflections captured in these pages, are a contribution to that ongoing mission — to reclaim the promise of a common Mediterranean space grounded in peace, development, and human dignity.

This publication, therefore, is more than a record of proceedings. It is an appeal to those committed to preserving the social fabric of diverse societies, to those who believe in dialogue over division, and to

those who understand that reclaiming our shared humanity is not a rhetorical gesture, but a strategic necessity. It invites us to reflect on the conditions that allow polarisation to thrive — and to commit ourselves to the hard, but essential, work of rebuilding inclusive narratives, democratic resilience, and mutual trust across the Euro-Mediterranean space.

In so doing, we reaffirm a simple yet powerful truth: that respect for the dignity of every human being is the cornerstone of any lasting peace project.



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KEYNOTES

RESTORING OUR SHARED HUMANITY: FINAL REFLECTIONS ON CONFLICT AND PEACE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN¹

Josep Borrell. High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission (2019-2024)

1. Speech delivered at the concluding session of the EuroMed Civil Society Conference, "Reclaiming Our Shared Humanity. Countering Polarisation, Dehumanisation, and Radicalisation Driven by the Middle East Conflict".

It looked quite impossible to bring together so many people to discuss peacefully – but seriously – the most important tragedy that the world is living today. The United Nations classifies Gaza as the most acute humanitarian crisis since World War II. Yes, there are others; Sudan maybe is bigger in numbers, but from the point of view of the acuteness, Gaza is unhappily the most important one.

The United Nations classifies Gaza as the most acute humanitarian crisis since World War II

So, my appreciation to the European Institute of the Mediterranean and thanks to all of you for being here. This is the first conference of this scope to discuss not the conflict in the Middle East but the effects of this conflict on our own societies as a driver of polarisation and hate. The discussions showed that it was very timely.

No need to reiterate the difficult context and the gravity of the situation, which everyone recognises by now.

Last week, US Vice-President Kamala Harris said: “I don’t know that anyone who has seen the images would not have strong feelings about what is happening.”

We talked about reclaiming humanity, we reclaim, we claim again, because we have lost it. Our shared humanity has been lost.

Leaders around the world have been sounding the alarm for months on what the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator Joyce Msuya describes as “unspeakable horrors” in Northern Gaza. We used this qualification – unspeakable – for the Hamas attacks against Israel, we don’t use it as often to explain what is happening in Gaza.

The 7/10 attack of Hamas was a horror. What is happening in Gaza is another horror – and one horror cannot justify another.

One horror cannot justify another

The world seems unable, or unwilling, to stop this man-made catastrophe unfolding before our eyes.

The UN Security Council, the European Union, the International Court of Justice and others have been unable to stop the ongoing mass destruction, displacement, and killing of civilians in Gaza, and now in Lebanon. Not because they don’t agree that it should stop – on the contrary. I attended the Lebanon conference, organised by President of France Emmanuel

Macron this week, and there was broad consensus among world leaders on the need for an immediate ceasefire. But ceasefire doesn't come – why not? Because we don't agree on the kind of action that is needed to make the ceasefire happen. When it comes to action, when we move from the words to the deeds, the divisions appear.

They reflect the divisions within our societies, across the Euro-Mediterranean area, and across the world. The polarisation around this issue is greater than ever before. Dehumanising vitriol has become common currency on social media.

Meanwhile, 50 children are being killed in Gaza every day – on average, for more than a year.

I echo the words of Rabbi Lee Weissman: “If you see the scenes in Gaza and your heart doesn't break, you are disconnected from your humanity.”

Maybe the problem is that we don't see it enough. As we say in Spanish, “ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente” [“what the eyes don't see, the heart doesn't feel”].

Maybe we don't see it enough, maybe there is a kind of censure, and we don't see the images of what is happening there.

In the Arab world, they see it every day, every moment. And maybe this explains why the reactions from that part of the world are different. We have to ask ourselves: How did we lose our shared sense of humanity? When and why did we lose it? And how can we reclaim it?

We have to ask ourselves: How did we lose our shared sense of humanity? When and why did we lose it? And how can we reclaim it?

To answer these questions, I will get down to the fundamentals. I will try to trace back to where we went

off track along five basic concepts: humanity; identity; truth; accountability; and, finally, peace.

HUMANITY

Simply reaffirming the universality of international law and human rights is not enough anymore. We have been doing so for the past year, and the result is sobering.

We need to dig deeper.

At their core, international law, the UN Charter, international humanitarian law, human rights law, among others, are predicated upon a certain human image: we believe that humans everywhere, regardless of group identity, are capable of empathy and compassion, that they prefer life in peace and prosperity over violence and death.

While this is certainly true, we need to remember that being human also means being capable of selfishness, of complacency, sometimes of vengefulness, hubris, and even brutality.

Yes, we are all – under certain circumstances – capable of committing atrocities against each other, or at least of condoning them. No group, no nation, no culture is entirely immune to this dark side of humanity. We have seen the horrors of 7 October 2023 against civilians in Southern Israel. The day before I was in Kyiv visiting the synagogue in the Babi Yar memorial, where 35,000 Jews were killed during World War II. When I went back home, another horror started. And this horror was celebrated in the streets of Gaza, as a great event.

We have been seeing the horrors that civilians in Gaza have been enduring since then for over a year – and we have seen extremists on the Gaza border watching, dancing, rejoicing, waiting to resettle this territory. We have seen the depraved and shameless display of inhumanity on social media. And, I repeat, it is the most acute crisis that the world has experienced since World War II.

Atrocities motivate atrocities, but they can never legitimate them. Nothing that happened before 7 October

can justify the slaughter and abduction of innocents, and nothing that happened on 7 October itself can justify the wanton destruction of Gaza and its people. Nothing can justify what an Israeli minister said: “We are fighting against human animals, and we will act accordingly” — a sentence that is already part of history.

Nonetheless, there is a silver lining: empathy and compassion instinctively prevent the vast majority of humans from committing atrocities.

Brutality, on the other hand, has to be learned. There are very few individuals who feel brutality as part of their being, thankfully.

To overcome our instinctive empathy, we first have to avoid dehumanising the other, not consider the other as animals. The Jews were considered as animals when they were exterminated by Nazis. Palestinians cannot now be considered as animals that deserve to starve.

We need to be convinced that the other is inherently different from us, that they lack what makes us human: that they have no compassion, no empathy, that they don't love their children like we do, or that they enjoy eternal conflict over living in peace with everybody.

I recently saw Israeli soldiers being interviewed on television. A very young boy, who had come from the front — he was of Argentinean origin, and spoke Spanish very well — said smiling: “There are no innocent people in Gaza, everybody is guilty in Gaza.” Even the 2/3 of the 45,000 people being killed? Guilty of what? Guilty of having been born in Gaza? We have to fight against this mentality if we want to regain our humanity.

IDENTITY

Unlike human nature, which is universal and immutable, group identities are what the Israeli intellectual Yuval Noah Harari calls “inter-subjective reality”: a reality that only exists because many people believe in it at the same time.

Where humanity is universal, identity is specific. It unites us with those who share it and divides us from those who don't.

But one can be a member of several groups at the same time. Identities are not necessarily exclusive. The richness of human beings is being able to have several identities, without any contradiction. I am a good example of that: I am Catalan, I am Spanish, I am European. The three identities are part of my identity, they are not controversial. They can live together, in peace.

Humanity is universal and identity is specific, it unites us with those who are like us and divides us from others. Identity provides a great comfort because it affords security and cohesion, but it can also create strife with those who lack this identity.

In fact, most identities are forged by friction against other identities. Palestinian identity was forged by the struggle with Zionism. Zionism was forged by the exclusion of Jews from European nations. Zionism came when the Jews in Europe understood that they were not going to be assimilated. The Dreyfus Affair in France or the situation in Imperial Russia showed to the Jews that even if they wanted to be part of the common society, they were excluded and then invented the idea of looking for a homeland for the Jewish people, which we Europeans agreed to create. And what can I say of the Spanish identity, forged by centuries of wars?

I think it was Amin Maalouf [the Lebanese-French intellectual], who talked about *Les Identités meurtrières* in his book. The word identity can be a killing word. And there are instigators of the word identity becoming a killing word. There are people who instigate identity as something that kills. All of these identitarian instigators have three things in common: first, a backward-looking approach to bring back “the good old days” whether those were 50 years ago, or 1,400, or even 3,500. Secondly, a binary, Manichean worldview and zero-sum logic in which it's either me or you — this land is mine, it is not yours, so I cannot share it

with you. This people believe that if you are not with me, you are against me. They demand unconditional support. If you are not with Israel, then you are with Hamas. And that is not true; I can criticise the Netanyahu government as much as I can criticise Hamas. I can't put them on the same level, one is a democratic government, and the other is a terrorist organisation, but I can criticise the Netanyahu government without being considered antisemitic. No, I am not antisemitic, the Secretary General of the UN is not antisemitic. But he, and I, and all of us, have the right to criticise the way a government behaves, be it Jewish or any other. Thirdly, a sense of group superiority – they understand they are better than the others, maybe in a subtle manner, but in the end they are superior. Supremacy. White supremacy, Jewish supremacy, I can say here in Spain also other kinds of supremacy. But identities can change, if there is an “intersubjective reality”, they change constantly – for better or for worse.

The Spanish identity I grew up with was very different from the Spain of today. Once a backward-looking dictatorship, it turned into to modern democracy, open to the world and member of the European Union. Our identity is much better today than 50 years ago.

I cannot say the same from the Israeli identity, the sociology of the Israeli society. When I went to Israel in 1969 to volunteer in a kibbutz, Israel was a thriving young democracy, the kibbutz was seen as a model, a socialist utopia.

In the five and a half decades since, Israel has changed a lot, and not for the good. And it can change again – it can go back to a better future. It will depend on how much we engage in it, and we have to engage with the Israeli society. We have to avoid the Massada complex for Israeli society. This fortress in the desert where the Jews were surrounded by the enemy, we have to avoid it.

And a good example is this letter signed by more than 3,000 Israeli citizens taking a position on the war in Gaza. That is why it is so important to engage with

Israeli society to avoid not only the Massada complex but also the Sanson complex. Both represent a big threat for Israeli society itself and for the rest of the region.

TRUTH

The third word is truth. Science looks for truth, and we have developed sophisticated methods to establish facts to the best of our ability. We are able to measure the acceleration of gravity. It is a fact. You cannot deny the law of gravity. If you jump from the window, you will kill yourself, so best not do it.

Science is the best remedy against lies. But truth is polyhedral, it has different faces. And I want to thank the prosecutors, investigators, journalists, historians, etc., everybody who looks for truth through systems of verification. That is why propagandists fear them like vampires fear garlic.

When a government, like the Netanyahu government, seeks to prevent independent verification by imposing the longest media blackout in the history of press freedom and by refusing to cooperate with prosecutors of the International Criminal Court and UN-mandated investigators, in defiance of legally binding orders of the International Court of Justice, this should make us all very suspicious of what is happening there.

There is a complete blackout of what is happening in Gaza. What we know is what Israeli soldiers themselves reveal by posting photographs on social media. But it has been the longest blackout imposed by a democracy in modern times. This is very worrisome. We have to condemn it.

More journalists, more UN staff, more humanitarian workers have been killed than in any other armed conflict. When more journalists, UN staff, and humanitarian workers are killed than in any other armed conflict, when judges of the ICC are publicly threatened, this should be a reason to be alarmed. The Declaration we have just heard addresses this dangerous trend well. I support every word of it.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Independent verification is the basis of accountability; and without accountability there cannot be justice. Accountability has to be comprehensive and impartial, regardless of the identity of the perpetrator or the victim. Here comes the issue of double standards. The important thing is not who does what but what is being done. We must look at the action, not the actor.

Accountability has to be comprehensive and impartial, regardless of the identity of the perpetrator or the victim

Impunity has been seen in the context of Gaza and now Lebanon. Why should Netanyahu stop the war in Lebanon? What is the cost of continuing? None. This is called impunity. It undermines our credibility and the entire international world order.

What is the international world order if there is not the capacity to impose the law? There are a lot of people that say that international order does not exist because there is no capacity to impose it. Yes, it exists. It exists but it is still too weak to be imposed on our law inside our nation states.

And let me remind you that there is no collective guilt. It is the absence of individual accountability that fosters calls for collective punishment. A sense of historical responsibility felt toward one group should never be an excuse to disregard the rights of another. The sense of historical responsibility that we Europeans may feel about the horrors of the World War II does not allow us to disregard the rights of the Palestinians today.

PEACE

The last word, the most important one, peace. The ultimate question is peace. It is intricately linked to the other four concepts I have been talking about. Peace.

To achieve peace, we need to appreciate that behind whatever distorted image of the “other” is being projected in our mind, there is an intrinsic willingness to live in peace that is part of human nature.

The remarkable peace efforts by Arab partners, based on the Arab Peace Initiative, should be made known to all Israelis. In turn, Israeli civil society activism for Palestinian rights needs to be spotlighted in the Arab world on every occasion. Both parties have to understand that in the other party there are people fighting for peace. That this is a common endeavour. That the other also wants peace. That the others are not a bunch of terrorists. The others also want peace, on both sides.

Let's be aware of the Arab Peace Initiative, of what the Palestinian and Israeli societies are doing in order to try to build a common peace. Let's talk about peace. Let's be critical, protest, but make sure to also talk about solutions. Let's put rhetoric aside and try to be practical.

What exactly the solution looks like is secondary to what it is based on. Let's talk about equal rights, mutual recognition, and respect for international law as the requirements for peace.

When someone says that they don't want the two-state solution, then they have the moral obligation to say what their solution is. You refuse the two-state solution, maybe for good reasons, but then tell me, what is your solution?

Yet, in fact, they are implementing another solution without naming it. They are not naming it, but in practical terms they are implementing it.

When former Israel Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated, there were 150,000 settlers in the West Bank; today there are 700,000. It was in 1995, and at that time Barcelona launched the Mediterranean Process to try to make peace survive after the Rabin assassination.

The two-state solution, obviously, is more difficult. But let's continue reclaiming our shared humanity. Let's ensure that Israeli supremacy or Palestinian

extremism are not the way to find a solution. Neither will bring a solution. The solution cannot be found in a military fight. There is no solution through arms. The solution has to come from diplomatic activity, the end to the illegal occupation, the end to the slaughter and starvation of innocents, the end of impunity – all this needs to stop.

But it will not stop just because we call for it. It will stop when the international community is ready to take coercive measures that can change the behaviour of the actors: the actors change their behaviour either by persuasion or under constraint. If the international community is not ready to exercise constraint for all actors – I mean all actors – unfortunately the war will continue.

The only way to end the war and to give security and peace to both peoples is to recognise that they have to share the land. They have been fighting for the same land for almost 100 years, and they have

good reasons to claim the land as theirs, but either they share the land, or one people will kill the other or make the other leave.

The only way to end the war and to give security and peace to both peoples is to recognise that they have to share the land

This is what we have to prevent, and that is why meetings like this are so important. I would like to have many more of them. I invite all the organisations, administrations, and political powers to follow this route, to make people talk and try to understand each other. This is maybe the first step on a long journey.

BRIDGING THE MEDITERRANEAN DIVIDE: A CALL FOR PEACE, SOLIDARITY, AND SUSTAINABLE PROGRESS²

Salvador Illa. President, Government of Catalonia

2. Institutional final address delivered at the concluding session of the EuroMed Civil Society Conference, "Reclaiming Our Shared Humanity. Countering Polarisation, Dehumanisation, and Radicalisation Driven by the Middle East Conflict".

As President of the Government of Catalonia, it is my pleasure to welcome you to Barcelona, especially those of you who have travelled from other parts of the Mediterranean.

This conference takes place in the old Drassanes Reials, the Royal Shipyards, a magnificent 13th-century Catalan Gothic building. The shipyards were built with the support of the Crown of Aragon, but also the Barcelona Consell de Cent government institution and the General Council of Catalonia. For seven centuries, ships were built here thanks to institutional and civil union and collaboration at the service of collective progress and mutual knowledge among all the nations on the shores of the Mediterranean.

These walls connect us with the founding spirit of the European Institute of the Mediterranean and with the aim of this conference, which is to preserve our human ties in the face of the unbearable tragedy in the Middle East.

Our feelings of helplessness are understandable as we realise that this is the worst situation since the Hamas attacks and Israel's devastating offensive. The war has spread to Lebanon following Israel's invasion of part of the country. Iran has bombed Israel, causing more casualties and chaos, and there have also been military actions in Yemen; five countries involved in a conflict that has already reached a regional scale and is having global consequences.

It is easy to become discouraged or, even worse, despondent.

Yet we must not fail to speak out or act. That would mean giving up on what we believe.

And this is the first great value arising from this conference: a reminder that we have a responsibility to keep hope alive.

I want to convey a conviction to you: the war will end. Our duty is to prepare for the first day of peace. Because, sooner or later, that day will come.

Our duty is to prepare for the first day of peace – because, sooner or later, that day will come

Do not doubt it. And together we will have to rebuild bridges, schools, entire cities. And we will also have to rebuild feelings, ties, families, and entire communities.

And for this to happen, the task that the entities, associations and humanitarian organisations that have gathered in Barcelona carry out every day, putting their lives at risk, is essential.

If we think and act at the closest level to the people in Israel, Gaza and Lebanon today, who are suffering the harshest consequences of the conflict, we can

move towards a humanitarian solution and open a path of hope for peace.

In Catalonia, we are very aware of this, and in the past we have demonstrated our ability to find paths to peace when they seemed impossible. We did so, for example, in 1992, when the then Mayor of Barcelona and later President of the Government of Catalonia, Pasqual Maragall, promoted District 11-Sarajevo, a cooperation project unparalleled in the world. With the active participation of civil society, it managed to break the spiral of war when states were unable to reach a truce.

Now, as in the past and in the future, Catalonia, with its government at the forefront, will not falter and will not give up.

Now, as in the past and in the future, Catalonia, with its government at the forefront, will not falter and will not give up

For this reason, as I have stated in the Catalan Parliament and will do so in all areas of political representation, in Catalonia we support the firmness shown by the Spanish Government and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, José Manuel Albares, in strongly condemning all acts of violence, demanding an immediate ceasefire because, above all other considerations, the defence of civilian lives is paramount, and calling for respect for international law; in other words, compliance with United Nations resolutions.

Hate speech would have us believe that war is the only way out. But war is not inevitable. Through politics, diplomacy and legality, nations, states and governments have a shared responsibility to find fair, lasting agreements for all parties, offering a glimmer of hope for the future.

Future generations will not forgive us if we fail to do so.

However, we must also recognise that slowness or indecision by political bodies sometimes prevents us from giving the answers and adopting the measures that the public asks of us.

The European Union must strengthen its role and its own unequivocal position in favour of peace. The European Union must work for a fair and lasting solution for all parties. This starts with taking the steps needed to enforce United Nations resolutions.

In this regard, I share the determination shown by the European Union High Representative, Josep Borrell, in urging Israel to take the measures needed to ensure humanitarian aid reaches Gaza and to prevent further deaths from starvation.

In Catalonia, through the Catalan Committee for Emergency Humanitarian Aid, we have already activated the first extraordinary aid package to the United Nations, in addition to the programmes and aid already in place in Palestine.

We are quite clear in that we will not abandon those who suffer most from the blindness and injustice of war. Catalonia is and will continue to be at the forefront of international solidarity.

Solidarity that must start with our Mediterranean neighbours.

As we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the 1995 Barcelona Declaration, the seed of the future Union for the Mediterranean, which is holding its 9th Forum in our capital tomorrow, it is time to regain the ambition and founding commitments of the Union.

Despite the war, the Mediterranean can continue to be a space for hope, opportunity and solidarity if we are able to deploy a more integrated political and social agenda.

Such colossal challenges as climate change, migration and the defence of democracy require bringing the Euro-Mediterranean agenda to the forefront.

We must prevent the gap between the two shores of Mare Nostrum from widening and share policies to make solutions effective and beneficial for all countries.

As we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the 1995 Barcelona Declaration, the seed of the future Union for the Mediterranean, which is holding its 9th Forum in our capital tomorrow, it is time to regain the ambition and founding commitments of the Union

The Mediterranean region is suffering a severe drought, hitting Spain, Italy, Morocco and Algeria, and affecting agriculture. The Mediterranean, where water is scarce, is home to 60% of the world's population. Rising temperatures and pollution also threaten the sea's biodiversity and essential activities, such as fishing.

It is up to us to turn this challenge into opportunities. The Mediterranean can become a centre of sustainable development by using its geographical location to boost sectors such as green energy, sustainable agriculture, and digitalisation. Catalonia offers its leadership in researching alternative energies, such as green hydrogen, and in the advantages of digitalisation to turn the Mediterranean, through regional cooperation, into an economic powerhouse, leading the way in sustainable development.

There is also an urgent need to defuse negative and manipulative rhetoric on migration.

Catalonia was, is and will continue to be a land of welcome. Since the return to democracy, Catalan

society has made an exemplary effort in integration. We take pride in our diversity because it enriches us. Europe cannot allow itself to be swayed by extremist rhetoric that fuels fear and racism. We must act responsibly and keep our own history very much in mind. In other words, we must address migration by putting humanitarian values and human rights first. Climate change and armed conflict are the main reasons why thousands of people are forced to flee their countries. Building more walls or reception centres of dubious legality in other countries is not the solution.

The solution lies in greater cooperation with the countries of origin, greater co-development, and further reduction of inequalities.

And, at the same time, it lies in major social policies in our own most vulnerable neighbourhoods and cities to dismantle the myths surrounding the reality of immigration, one by one.

In Catalonia, as in Spain and Europe, migrants from other countries play a key role in our social cohesion and progress, as they often work in the toughest jobs, such as in construction, agriculture, hospitality, and caring for our families.

I would like to end with an invitation and a thank you. An invitation to stroll through the streets of Barcelona, in the Raval district, one of the most culturally diverse neighbourhoods in the city. Of course, it has its social difficulties, but we tackle them with the conviction that diversity enriches us.

And I would like to thank the exceptional musicians of the Barenboim-Said Akademie. Because peace often begins with something as simple, yet powerful, as a piece of music.



PART I

POLARISATION AND DE-HUMANISATION IN THE EUROPEAN AND EUROMED AGENDA³

3. Based on the institutional addresses delivered during the two-day EuroMed Civil Society Conference, "Reclaiming Our Shared Humanity. Countering Polarisation, Dehumanisation, and Radicalisation Driven by the Middle East Conflict", held in Barcelona on October 26-27, 2024.

CLAIMING OUR SHARED HUMANITY: SPAIN AND THE FUTURE OF THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN PARTNERSHIP

José Manuel Albares. Minister for Foreign Affairs,
European Union and Cooperation, Government
of Spain

I am glad to be here today to kick-start two days of reflection and debate on crucial issues for Spain and our foreign policy. Your presence here today underscores the importance of our collective efforts in shaping Euro-Mediterranean relations and adds significant value to our deliberations.

Barcelona is a city that looks to the Mediterranean. Algiers is half as far away from we are right now closer as Lisbon. We are not far from the Spanish border with France, yet Paris is only slightly closer than Tunis. Looking at the sea from Barcelona, we are reminded that half of Spain, our entire Mediterranean seaboard, looks towards the Euro-Mediterranean region as its neighbour.

By this sea, this Mare Nostrum, we call neighbouring countries that are thousands of kilometres away. Countries in the Levant, in North Africa, and in the Balkan and Anatolian peninsulas. Countries that, to be reached by land, we would have to cross not one, not two, but many, many national borders, as many as it would take to go from Istanbul to Singapore.

Yet, the Mediterranean breaks these distances and creates bonds of neighbourhood that unite the whole region under a common set of shared interests and challenges. We are here because of this simple geographical, historical, and cultural fact.

Today's "Reclaiming our Shared Humanity" conference could not be more aptly named or timed. In our current times marked by unprecedented intercon-

nectedness, we find ourselves paradoxically divided. The scourge of hate speech, amplified by digital platforms, threatens the very fabric of our societies. It targets the vulnerable – migrants, minorities, women, and individuals of diverse orientations. This is not just a violation of human dignity but an assault on the pluralistic, inclusive societies we strive to build. The conflicts raging across our region have exacerbated these challenges. We have witnessed an alarming rise in both antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred, online and offline. These are not isolated incidents but symptoms of a deeper malaise: the dehumanisation of the "other".

Yet, the Mediterranean breaks these distances and creates bonds of neighbourhood that unite the whole region under a common set of shared interests and challenges

Let us be clear: hate speech and disinformation are not mere words. They are weapons that can shatter social cohesion and fuel the fires of conflict. They directly threaten democracy, human rights, and the rule of law – the foundations of our shared values. Spain condemns and will always condemn hate

speech and any threat to democracy, human rights and international law, all of them at the core of the shared core values of Spanish society.

We are witnessing a calculated assault on truth itself. Certain political actors, driven by a thirst for power, have chosen to weaponise disinformation. They spread lies with impunity, distorting reality to fit their narratives. Every issue, no matter how complex, is reduced to a simplistic battle in an endless cultural war.

Let us be clear: hate speech and disinformation are not mere words. They are weapons that can shatter social cohesion and fuel the fires of conflict

These merchants of division and hate see everything through the lens of conflict. Climate change? A war on industry. Immigration? A war on national identity. Gender equality? A war on traditional values. International law? A war on sovereignty.

This cynical approach poisons our public discourse and erodes the foundations of rational debate. This is no mere rhetoric but extremists trying to divide societies for political gains.

However, we are not powerless in the face of these challenges. Our response must be multifaceted and resolute. We must foster dialogue and understanding across cultures, religions, and communities. Genuine engagement is the only way to dispel stereotypes and build bridges. We need to invest in education and digital literacy. Empowering our citizens, especially the youth, to critically evaluate digital information is our best defence against disinformation. We must collaborate with civil society and tech companies to develop effective strategies for countering hate speech online while preserving

freedom of expression. And we must redouble our efforts to protect minorities and vulnerable groups. Their safety and inclusion are non-negotiable elements of a fair society.

Our response must be multifaceted and resolute. We must foster dialogue and understanding across cultures, religions, and communities

This conference is a promising step. It recognises that antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred, and other forms of discrimination and racism are interconnected challenges that require unified responses.

As we navigate these turbulent times, let us remember that our diversity is not a weakness but our greatest strength. By reclaiming our shared humanity and reaffirming the dignity of every individual, we lay the foundation for lasting peace and prosperity in the Euro-Mediterranean region and beyond.

To that end, both the Union for the Mediterranean and the Anna Lindh Foundation have a key role in building bridges and strengthening societies. The Union for the Mediterranean is instrumental in fostering dialogue, defining agendas and promoting projects in areas such as youth employment, inclusive growth, women empowerment, higher education or vocational training. In parallel, the Anna Lindh Foundation is a powerful tool to promote intercultural dialogue and the strengthening of civil society.

These issues are critical to understanding the future of international relations in the coming years, not only in Europe and the Mediterranean but also in the world. States' foreign policy is increasingly conditioned by the troubling dynamics that affect and divide our societies. We are no strangers to this phenomenon in the European Union, where far right, Eurosceptic forces are gaining ground. The recent

elections to the European Parliament are a case in point of how these forces can shape the narrative and the European agenda even without achieving majorities in the institutions.

Not only when they are vocally ultranationalist but also when they adopt a milder, more acceptable-looking localism. They say to citizens: "Why worry about the world's problems when you have so many of your own at home? Why should the suffering of others in faraway places concern you?"

When such narratives permeate society, they can seriously curtail the government's leeway to act in the international arena. And, it is only in the international arena where some of society's most existential challenges, global challenges, can be addressed: climate change, pandemics, artificial intelligence, nuclear proliferation, and, of course, war.

There is no other way to say it: these nativist narratives are a danger to our national interests, however much they may portray themselves as its champions. They are also a danger to our security.

There is no other way to say it: these nativist narratives are a danger to our national interests, however much they may portray themselves as its champions

We live in a time of multiple conflicts and crises, from Ukraine to Gaza and Lebanon, not forgetting other regions like the Sahel or the Horn of Africa. Conflicts are rising in number and intensity all over the world. The economic impact of all this violence is estimated at 13% of world GDP; that is, the equivalent to all the wealth created by 180 countries put together.

Behind this figure are the millions of human lives – tens of millions, perhaps hundreds – blighted by poverty and displacement. Behind this suffering is

the squandered potential of many generations, as wars leave a trail of devastation that can last for many decades after the guns go silent. All this without mentioning the death and destruction brought by the conflicts themselves.

This state of affairs points to a collective failure we are responsible for addressing and rectifying. This is the failure to uphold, respect, and enforce the United Nations Charter and international law. If conflicts seem to be constantly multiplying in our times, it is because the rules and institutions that protect the peaceful coexistence of nations are fraying. When ignoring and breaking these rules becomes acceptable, when there are no consequences, it is unsurprising if the atrocities committed in one part of the world are replicated elsewhere. If there is impunity, conflicts will mushroom. And it will not be long before the insecurity that only affects others today boomerangs back against our own societies in the most unexpected ways.

This is why Spain has constantly upheld the importance of being consistent in demanding the respect of international law by every state in every part of the world. There can be no double standards. Perhaps this is best exemplified by our decision to officially recognise the State of Palestine. Spain did it out of the certainty that it was the right thing to do, as a matter of justice for the Palestinian people and to underscore the importance of upholding international law, even more so now that the International Court of Justice has ruled the occupation as unlawful.

Spain has constantly upheld the importance of being consistent in demanding the respect of international law by every state in every part of the world. There can be no double standards

With this recognition, we also had the intention of bringing peace closer, offering a horizon of hope and dignity to the Palestinians and making possible future bilateral peace negotiations. This is, of course, a matter of principle, but it also shows a keen awareness of our own interests. Double standards create vulnerabilities that our enemies will be quick to exploit. Double standards anger societies, justifiably. They polarise, they radicalise, and they undermine trust in institutions. They breed cynicism and eat away at the foundations of civic pride and democratic culture. They jeopardise our image in the world and our ability to build partnerships: an essential ability for upholding our national interests in an interconnected world. In short, double standards are a very poor geopolitical investment.

Spain believes in an active foreign policy, a vocal foreign policy that does not entail a passive role that revolves around a firm defence of international law and international humanitarian law, which are the limits for any military intervention, be it in Lebanon or in Gaza, and for the right of self-defence.

We are doing this in the Middle East, where our first objective is to put an end to the tremendous humanitarian suffering after a year of ravaging war in Gaza, and for which we demand an immediate ceasefire that allows for the liberation of hostages and the massive distribution of humanitarian aid. This is the key for regional de-escalation.

We demand an immediate ceasefire that allows for the liberation of hostages and the massive distribution of humanitarian aid

We are also working in Gaza to support the arrangements for the stabilisation phase and for a political perspective. The only way out of this

conflict is the two-state solution, and we are publicly advocating that only its implementation can end the cycle of violence that engulfs the Middle East. Not only does its implementation require recognition, but also a framework in which to thrive. That is why Spain has put forward the idea of an international peace conference with the parties and the international community. So far, more than 90 countries support this idea. We are already within the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution that was launched in New York to support concrete steps towards peace and stability in the region.

Similarly, our foreign action is focused on the situation of Lebanon, tending to the humanitarian crisis provoked by massive bombings in the South and East as well as densely populated areas in Beirut that have caused thousands of casualties and wounded more than 1.2 million displaced people. Likewise, we are also focused on stabilising Lebanon within the framework of the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, for which UNIFIL is essential. We have condemned Israeli attacks against UNIFIL and we demand that the parties guarantee the security of the peacekeepers.

We are also vocal in supporting Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and freedom. In both cases, with consistency in the defence of the UN Charter, international law, and international humanitarian law.

In the broader Mediterranean region, Spain promotes the strengthening of the regional partnership both from a multilateral perspective, through the Union for the Mediterranean and the Anna Lindh Foundation, and from a bi-regional perspective through the European Southern Neighbourhood Policy. We promote an ambitious and sustainable reform of the Union for the Mediterranean that would lead to an update of its strategic priorities, a strengthening of political commitment and an increase of means to ensure

it can fulfil its mandate. This reform should lead to the adoption of an updated Union for the Mediterranean Roadmap to be adopted next year, on the 30th anniversary of the Barcelona Process. In parallel, the new institutional cycle in the EU provides a unique opportunity to strengthen its Southern Neighbourhood Policy. To that end, the Mediterranean partnership should be placed at the top of the EU agenda, a strong institutional architecture should be adopted, priority areas should be agreed in consultation with southern partners, and complementarity with the UfM should be ensured.

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I have spoken of threats and challenges, but I want to conclude with optimism and a sense of opportunity, as I am sure conversations during the next two days will also do. As we face conflict, polarisation, radicalisation and dehumanisation, bringing together distinguished actors and analysts from across the Mediterranean is an extraordinary initiative and a unique opportunity to build a positive agenda and, therefore, contribute to peace and stability.

Fernand Braudel once wrote: "The Mediterranean is what men have made of it." I believe that is also the case today. The region's future will be what we, policymakers and society, succeed in making of it. Looking East from here, in Barcelona, to the other extreme of the Mediterranean, in Gaza and Lebanon, it becomes evident that this is a task that all our societies share, because we are connected.

It also becomes clear that what lies ahead is a task of building tolerance, accepting diversity, and generating mutual understanding. To finish quoting from Braudel: "To travel in the Mediterranean is to find the Roman world in Lebanon, pre-history in Sardinia, Greek cities in Sicily, the Arab presence in Spain, and Turkish Islam in Yugoslavia."

This story of tolerance is our heritage, and we must endeavour to make it our future.

A SHARED MEDITERRANEAN FUTURE: OVERCOMING DIVISION THROUGH DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION

Nasser Kamel. Secretary General,
Union for the Mediterranean

Today's Civil Society Forum provides a vital opportunity for open and heartfelt dialogue about the challenges our region has faced over the past year and beyond. In this context, I stand before you with a heart both heavy and hopeful as we confront a pivotal moment in our shared history. Heavy, because the conflicts in our Euro-Mediterranean region have long catalysed hatred, sowing division in our societies. In the wake of the tragic events of 7 October 2023, the polarisation of our communities has reached unprecedented levels, fuelled by anger and despair.

We cannot begin these two-day exchanges without acknowledging the dire situation in Palestine and Lebanon, where international humanitarian principles and the sanctity of civilian lives are being completely disregarded. Millions of children are caught in the crossfire, enduring unimaginable hardships. This is not just a humanitarian crisis — it is a crisis of humanity, eroding our collective moral compass.

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Here, we must look toward our youth — the vibrant force of our societies — who stand on the brink of

being lost in this cycle of violence and trauma. The narratives they hear today will shape their Mediterranean identity, their understanding of “the other”, and their capacity for empathy. If we allow them to be consumed by hatred, we risk sacrificing not only their future but our shared destiny — our capacity to feel and fight our common challenges as one.

History has taught us that rage and vengeance lead only to more brutality. The path to security for the Israelis, the Palestinians, the Lebanese, and the entire region lies not in continued violence but in collective efforts to extinguish hatred. It is time to come together, to stand against the madness we see unfolding, and to forge a new path, one illuminated by hope and understanding.

Building trust across the Mediterranean, bridging North, South and East, requires us to restore dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation without delay. We must urgently rebuild bridges, both within and across our societies. Through these efforts, we can shatter the walls of prejudice and let empathy shine through. We must listen to each other, hear about each other's wounds, and confront underlying grievances openly to build a sustainable peace.

That is why I also carry hope, hope that civil society has a crucial role in this journey: in dialogue, truth-telling, and rebuilding mutual understanding. Inclusive organisations are essential in promoting counternarratives that celebrate our shared humanity. Educational initiatives

can empower our youth to challenge hate and embrace diversity, cultivating a generation of peace-builders and advocates for coexistence. In this quest for peace, we must also elevate the voices of women. Women, as agents of change, strength and resilience, are vital in shaping our societies and fostering better peace and security policies.

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This conference aims to unite civil society actors from across the Euro-Mediterranean space, acknowledging the indispensable role they play in preventing our societies from drifting apart. The organisations present here today, and I talk on behalf of the Union for the Mediterranean, can be instrumental in facilitating these dialogues, providing the necessary framework to promote understanding and cooperation among diverse communities.

Antisemitism and the dehumanisation of Palestinians and Lebanese are interconnected phenomena, creating an environment where mistrust thrives. It is essential that we work together under our shared institutions to foster solutions that transcend divisive, zero-sum thinking.

Together, we can nurture a new narrative, one that emphasises our shared humanity, respect for dignity, and the pursuit of a brighter future for all. The most effective way to address polarisation is to resolve the underlying issues that perpetuate it.

This conference has two concrete outcomes: a Joint Declaration from our discussions, and the establishment of an Advisory Group of experts to continue these deliberations. These outcomes will solidify our collective vision and lay the groundwork for future action.

Together, we can nurture a new narrative, one that emphasises our shared humanity, respect for dignity, and the pursuit of a brighter future for all

The path ahead may be challenging, but the rewards of peace, coexistence, and mutual understanding are worth every effort.

BUILDING BRIDGES IN TIMES OF POLARISATION: THE POWER OF INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

HRH Princess Rym Ali. President, Anna Lindh
Foundation

This conference, whose ambition is to ask the right questions, seeks to determine whether we can, at least in this time of intense conflict — which the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has now called the darkest hour — and in this time of extreme polarisation, try to find common ground.

And I have to say, I do believe that, yes, we do need to reclaim our humanity, because it has been lost. The fact that we now have to sit down with like-minded people — which I assume most of us are — just to remind ourselves of a notion we once took for granted speaks to how dire the situation has become: that we all, equally, deserve to live in freedom and dignity on this earth.

We also agree that reclaiming our humanity and countering polarisation are not only aimed at stopping the current violence, but at least at making sure that when the sound of the gun stops, this does not happen again, and that we can still live together in our diversity.

Now, I also believe that there can be no viable peace without the buy-in of civil societies. Hence, the very important role that we can all play at this conference. Unfortunately, envisioning peace in our region feels more like a distant dream today.

I left Amman a couple of days ago for this trip with images in my head of the 20-year-old social media influencer Shaban al-Dalou burning alive as he tried

to escape his blazing tent in Gaza; of dispossessed people fleeing for the fourth or fifth time in a year. Meanwhile the level of horror all this time has still not prompted the powers that be to stop delivering arms as they decry the violence. It's an indication that this law of the strongest, which prevailed before World War II, is right where we are, again.

And I will admit, I struggle to see a peaceful outcome for now, because everywhere we look, there are double standards signifying to those in the south that they matter less. If the sight of entire families shattered, bombed, and people burned alive does not move politicians, then civil society organizations can come together with a unified message of compassion and empathy, not for one side or the other, but for the suffering of tens of thousands of human beings. We are sorely missing a shared understanding of what is happening to our Euro-Mediterranean region.

So, we come to my first of three points: to have a shared humanity, we need to have a shared perception and understanding of the realities and a common interpretation of the values we claim to share. It is, after all, Europe's collective memory of World War II and the horrors it wrought that prompted the creation of the European Union.

How do we achieve that at the scale of our Euro-Mediterranean region? The Anna Lindh Foundation was created 20 years ago precisely as an instrument of dialogue to reject a clash of civilisations in the

region. What we are witnessing today is causing a rupture of dialogue between and within societies, a dialogue that we at the Anna Lindh Foundation, like many of you, are striving to maintain, because dialogue and mutual respect guarantee our safety. But recent events in our region show that never again, in fact, does not apply to all. There is a selective application of human rights and international law. Some political leaders in Europe have recently gone as far as tweaking these rules to justify the killing of civilians.

To have a shared humanity, we need to have a shared perception and understanding of the realities and a common interpretation of the values we claim to share

Some see only the rise of antisemitism. Others see only the dehumanisation of Palestinians. This split perspective is reinforced by the use, deliberate or not, conscious or not, of the terms we use, the discrepancy that seeps into the very language that we use. Demanding free Palestine means for those calling for it a state where Palestinians can live simply with dignity, enjoying basic rights which are currently denied to them. Others see in it a call for the elimination of Israel. I believe that it is not antisemitic to be antizionist. On a side note, we all know that Arabs are Semites, so using this accusation against Arabs is nonsensical. It is also not being anti-Jewish to criticise the state of Israel, no more than criticising theocracies in Iran or Afghanistan is Islamophobic. In many Arab countries, the word Jews or Jewish is commonly used to refer to Israelis, creating a dangerous confusion that may lead to inconsiderate acts against a community that was once protected in the Arab region. While individuals committing acts of ter-

ror are immediately and rightly termed terrorists, state terrorism is an expression we hardly, if ever, hear. When Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel coined the term Islamic terrorism in a speech in Washington DC in 1984, it stuck, and with it the insinuation that Islam itself is a violent religion.

So, at the root of this polarisation, let's remember that this is a conflict that cannot be seen as being fought by equal sides. One side has a greater monopoly on language and narrative, not to mention the pure physical force on the ground.

There is no society, though, within the Euro-Mediterranean region that has been left immune to the deep cracks that this war has caused. In Lebanon, the Israeli invasion has deeply divided communities along lines of faith and politics once more. In Palestine and Israel, the divisions are different, but they are present. While everywhere, videos circulate abundantly of people celebrating the suffering of others.

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So, this is my second question: What are the roots of this absence of a shared perception? The media and social media contribute largely to the selective perceptions of reality. With new technologies driving increased possibilities for misinformation, disinformation and fake news, international journalists are still not allowed to report freely from Gaza, while few in the North watch the Arab networks which are present in the Strip.

Journalists, guarantors of accountability, are being killed in Palestine and Lebanon with total impunity. As a result, not every voice is heard equally. In an area of conflict like this one, fact-checking is crucial.

We need to find trusted sources, and in that respect, it has emerged that a lot of the big tech companies are not so trustworthy. I recently came across an article about Facebook describing how the company employs a former Israeli government employee who makes sure the perspectives of her government are taken into account, defining the censorship policy of this platform on issues related to the current conflict. This is important because we know how powerful images are, and that our shared humanity in fact stops at our visible diversity. We naturally empathise with people who look like us, but some find it hard to relate to people who look, act and dress differently.

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Asylum seekers and migrants fleeing the Middle East and North Africa are often seen in Europe as a source of strain, though they contribute to the continent's ageing economies. You may have seen the video of French people who asked what percentage of their population they believed was Muslim. Most of them said at least 30%, when in reality it is 10%. This, against a firmly rooted belief in the West of an overriding Judeo-Christian culture, a myth which forgoes the fact that the Christian community in the Levant, where Christianity was born, largely identifies with its Arab-Muslim environment.

What widens the gap between people living on the same land is where each one places the historical cursor. When did it all start? On 7 October 2023? In 1948? In 1917? Or the time of the Crusades in the

11th century or 2,000 years ago? Such a question is far from being trivial. Examples abound of how history is perceived, understood, and transmitted; with no common reading of past events, there can be no common understanding of the current reality.

And so, my last question is this: How do we come back from this state of affairs to reclaim our shared humanity? In the middle of the ethnic cleansing that is currently taking place in Gaza, it is too early to ask a Palestinian to see in an Israeli someone alongside whom he can live when his family has been decimated. Likewise, it is probably too early to ask an Israeli to engage when their child is still being held hostage.

There are several groups of victims who are getting together, a minority today. They could be an example tomorrow. All of you here can counter the polarisation that has affected our societies beyond those living in conflict right now by helping the communities you serve to think and act with compassion. Only four days after 7 October last year, the Canadian academic Naomi Klein famously said: "Side with the child over the gun every single time, no matter whose gun and no matter whose child."

Concretely, a first step would be to get out of our echo chambers and listen to the others' perceptions and interpretations, whether through traditional or social media, or during encounters such as those made possible through civil society activities.

The common declaration that you are working on should call for an end to arms sales, without which the demand for a ceasefire is meaningless.

We could also draw inspiration from previous examples such as France and Germany after World War II, South Africa and Rwanda, and at how history looks back on those who did all they could to preserve their shared humanity in the darkest and most shameful areas of their past, and those who did not.

TOWARD PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Sven Koopmans. European Special Representative for
the Middle East Peace Process (2021-February 2025)

We are now seeing unimaginable suffering in the Middle East, in Gaza. Let me start there.

First, of course, we had the terrible attacks of 7 October, and I visited some of the kibbutzim where these attacks happened. The stories of the killings and hostage takings are just atrocious. But when you're there, you hear the explosions, the rockets falling on Gaza. And now we know that there are at least 42,000 people killed in Gaza, and everybody agrees, everybody knows that the vast majority are innocent civilians. Innocent civilians are being killed and with no end in sight and, by now, almost all of them have been displaced several times, moving from rubble to rubble, without food, without medical support. The situation is absolutely unimaginable and atrocious.

Innocent civilians are being killed and with no end in sight. The situation is absolutely unimaginable and atrocious

Then, of course, we now have the war in Lebanon. And yes, some 60,000 people in Israel have been unable to go home over the last year since Hezbollah started attacking Israel. Also, now more than a million Lebanese have had to flee their homes. And

we have seen more than 2,000 deaths already in Lebanon. And there seems to be no end there yet. And, of course, we have the terrible violence in the West Bank, and the continuing occupation.

We have the situation between Israel and Iran. And we have all seen the news, of course. And let's not forget what is happening in Yemen and the Houthis attacking ships and holding people hostage. And the situation in Syria. The crisis, the conflicts and the wars in the Middle East are so enormous. We all have a responsibility to contribute to ending it. Of course, the International Court of Justice and the United Nations Security Council have said what they said about illegality, the need for a ceasefire, and the need for humanitarian aid to come through. We have all been very clear about that. Not everybody said the same thing, but, from the European Union side, we all say there needs to be a ceasefire right now, a ceasefire for Gaza, a ceasefire for Lebanon, and of course also for Israel.

While this is ongoing, there seems to be so little hope. And I want to recall that High Representative Borrell and also the Commissioner-General of UNWRA, the refugee agency, which on behalf of the United Nations takes care over decades of millions of Palestinians, have also called now for a separate temporary truce, so that at least in Northern Gaza, where now the crisis is at unimaginable numbers of deaths, but at least some aid, some food, can come through. But

there seems to be no response to that call, neither from the Israeli side nor from Hamas.

And, of course, neither for the parallel situation in Lebanon. While we see these crises broadening, deepening and running into the abyss, the European Union tries to contribute to de-escalation. Collectively, the European Union institutions in Brussels and its Member States are the biggest humanitarian donors, and this is partially through essential UN organisations. We are the largest donor to the Palestinian Authority. We have been for decades. We are also the largest trading partner for Israel. We care very deeply about the fate, about the security, about the prosperity of Israelis and Palestinians. All of us in the European Union, whether you are in Spain, if I dare say so, in the presence of the Foreign Minister, or in Romania, or in Lithuania or in Malta, care very deeply about Israelis and Palestinians, their security, their future and their freedom. And we see that we as Europeans have a role to play, to contribute to that future, for their sake, but also our own.

Collectively, the European Union institutions in Brussels and its Member States are the biggest humanitarian donors – and the largest trading partner for Israel

So, while we try to stop those wars and act against terrorism and we try to prevent the rise that we see right now of antisemitism and of anti-Muslim hatred and of hatred all around, we see the dangers also for our own societies of a terrorism inspired by this conflict, violence, hatred, and, let's face it, also, the enormous potential of new illegal migration.

We need to focus not just on ending these crises but also addressing the fundamentals of the conflict that underlies it. And whether you want to define that

as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the Israeli-Arab conflict, or a wider one because Iran is, of course, also involved, I would say that all of us are involved. It is also a European conflict in a way.

So we also have a responsibility to move forward. I want to emphasise that the top priority, for the EU, is to see an end to the suffering right now, to see an end to the fighting, an end to the hunger and to the despair. Yet we also see that we have a responsibility to address the root of the problem. And there I am glad to say that just a few weeks ago, during the United Nations General Assembly High-level Week, also with the support of Spain, High Representative Borrell, flanked by the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia and the Foreign Ministers of many other countries, including Jordan – I see Her Royal Highness Princess Rym here – but also Egypt, Bahrain, Qatar, Indonesia, Türkiye, Norway and many others, we launched the Global Alliance for the implementation of the two-state solution.

The Global Alliance aims not to plead for the two-state solution, because we've done that enough, but aims to actually prepare for the two-state solution, because we may say that this party or that party is not ready for it or maybe doesn't even want it, that doesn't mean that we don't have a responsibility to work on getting there. There is only one solution to this conflict, and this is the two-state solution. Some may say we're heading for one state. Yes, that may be the one-state reality, but it is not the one-state solution. So, we need to work on the two-state solution, and, in this Global Alliance, we have said we are going to prepare everything that we can prepare in terms of security for the Israelis and for the Palestinians, economic integration, security integration, mapping out the future of an integrated region where Israel lives in peace with Saudi Arabia and Algeria and Kuwait, and all Arab States. And also that Palestine is recognised by all countries of the world as a free and sovereign state.

In a few days, we will actually have the first practical implementation meeting in Riyadh. And another in a few weeks' time, under the chairmanship of HRVP Borrell in Brussels, and later we will move on to other capitals in the region and in the world, because we see that it is also our responsibility in the midst of this crisis to prepare for the solution that underlies it. Yes, this is an effort that may fail. But you are civil society representatives. You work on things where you know the chances of success are limited. But we have to try. Because to those who say, well, this is not the time for the two-state solution, I would say, well, when was it the time for the two-state solution? And how successful were we then? And for those who say it is not the time, let's wait for when circumstances are better, I would say: How many people need to die before you think it is the time? The time to prepare for the two-state solution is right now. Now it is a responsibility for governments, including for the European Union, but it is also a responsibility for the people.

The time to prepare for the two-state solution is right now

Of course, the fundamental responsibility is for the Israelis and the Palestinians and their immediate neighbours. We cannot replace them. We can only help them. But it is also a responsibility for the people more broadly. And this is where I look at you. Participants are gathered here under the wonderful title of "shared humanity". But I would believe that we don't need the discussions here among us to convince each other that we need to stand up for shared humanity.

So, I would ask you not just to focus on the discussions that you have today and tomorrow, but also to focus on those you will have when you leave here. Because as civil society representatives, you have a special role, a special connection to the people in the societies of the Middle East and of Europe and wherever else you may be, to actually lay the groundwork for solving these conflicts.

COUNTERING POLARISATION AND HATE SPEECH FOR LASTING PEACE

Jaume Duch. Minister for European Union
and External Action, Government of Catalonia

I would like, first of all, to congratulate you on this very necessary initiative that aims to promote spaces of dialogue and the search for consensus in the face of the worrying trend of polarisation, dehumanisation, and radicalisation in our region, as well as conflict and war.

Civil society has an essential role as a facilitator of meeting points, weaving alliances among the many actors, and bringing citizens closer to institutions. Without civil society, there will be no just or lasting solutions to any conflict, because it is usually civil society that tends to anticipate what institutions and governments may propose or implement.

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We are aware that we face new and pending challenges, but I am convinced that, at this precise moment, we all share the hope that peace will return to the Mediterranean. This is the greatest urgency of the moment and it would be the most important

achievement we could hope for as we approach the 30th anniversary of the Barcelona Process. We need a Mediterranean of coexistence and peace, a space that generates opportunities for young people, where progress and socioeconomic development respond to the needs and demands of the respective societies. We are living through a very complex geopolitical moment, with an increasingly fragmented international order, where new alliances between countries emerge, new poles of power; a more multipolar and diverse world — but also one in which democracies are losing ground and in which populist and extremist ideologies continue to gain traction.

A fundamental element to counter this trend is the fight against disinformation and the interference it often entails. This is a topic you will discuss today and one that Catalonia's government considers particularly important, given its direct consequences on the polarisation of our societies, the quality of dialogue, and, ultimately, the weakening of democratic systems. We are seeing this both within the territory of the European Union and, more seriously, in some former Soviet republics, whose citizens should be able to determine their own destiny.

Governments and institutions have the obligation to provide citizens with access to reliable and quality sources of information. Yuval Noah Harari puts it very clearly: most information is garbage, untrue. Real information is scarce because writing a truthful

report takes time, money, and effort. Fiction is cheap, and truth is often complex. Most people prefer simple stories. If we want the truth to prevail, we must invest in it: we need newspapers, societies, and academic institutions. This is the great responsibility of today's societies: to resist a naive view.

This is a topic you will discuss today and one that Catalonia's government considers particularly important, given its direct consequences on the polarisation of our societies

Indeed, we cannot afford a naive view of the reality of information, which is fertile ground for fake news and falsehoods that fuel hate speech, generate polarisation, and manipulate emotions in a negative way. Keep this in mind when you debate today how to combat hate speech, as I believe it is a key element. From spaces like this one — centres of knowledge — you have a distinguished responsibility to promote reflection based on facts and reality, as a path toward dialogue and mutual understanding.

In this increasingly uncertain multipolar world, Europe must be capable of playing a greater role. Having the right approach is not enough. We also need the capacity to move it forward. But for that, there is still much work to be done.

In the coming years, it will be essential for us — for the European Union — to be able to defend its interests and positions, to understand and respect its neighbours, and to establish relationships of trust that ensure regional stability. We know what we must do. This is what the Strategic Compass, approved two years ago by the European External Action Service, teaches us. We have the diagnoses, yes, but they must be accompanied by the political will and leadership needed to make them a reality.

As I already mentioned, disinformation and manipulation techniques have a strong impact, undermining this goal and making politicians less consistent and citizens more vulnerable. We must be able to overcome this situation and have a clear direction. The coming years will be far from easy. And precisely for this reason, it will be more important than ever to strengthen the European Union so that it becomes the great collective umbrella needed by its 450 million inhabitants — and, in some way, also the rest of the Mediterranean.

But this same pro-European vocation also involves strengthening the Mediterranean vision, giving it true priority. Beyond the conclusions of ministerial meetings or EU institutions, we must rediscover the spirit of Paul Valéry, who said that the Mediterranean is a machine for making civilisations, especially now, when it must be a sea of peace, not a sea of swords. On the eve of a new European legislature, we must redirect our Mediterranean actions to address challenges such as the climate crisis and its consequences, food sovereignty, migratory phenomena, job creation, housing, which heavily affects younger generations, and the role of women in contemporary society and their specific contribution to the peace-building process. To succeed — and the challenge is immense — we must be aware of where we come from and where we want to go.

Let us begin with the Barcelona Process: a collective project to strengthen cooperation and dialogue between the European Union and the countries of the Mediterranean basin. On this basis, the goal is to promote stability, security, and prosperity through partnerships with southern countries, and cooperation on issues like water, technology, and youth — shared concerns that unite us. The Barcelona Declaration consolidated Euro-Mediterranean partnerships and led to the establishment, here in Barcelona as you know well, of the headquarters of the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean. Today, the Government of Catalonia defends, in rela-

tion to the priorities of the new European Commission, the need for Europe to focus its attention on the Mediterranean. For this reason, we welcome the decision of the President of the European Commission to create a portfolio for the Mediterranean in the new College of Commissioners, as well as the promotion of a new pact for the Mediterranean and a strategy for the Middle East. These are examples of Europe's strengthened view of a strategic space for the Union, which we hope can contribute to the construction of regional peace.

Three decades ago, with the Barcelona Process, we were pioneers. But we don't want to speak only in the past tense. We are very critical of the lack of results to stop the conflict and the unbridled violence in Gaza, in Israel, in Lebanon. We insist once again on the obligation for all states to fully respect international law and humanitarian international law. The lives of civilians must be respected and protected always and everywhere. Humanitarian aid should be allowed and facilitated.

Today, the Government of Catalonia defends, in relation to the priorities of the new European Commission, the need for Europe to focus its attention on the Mediterranean

In this regard, we endorse the calls of the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres and the work done by the High Representative of the European Union, Josep Borrell, for an immediate ceasefire, and we underline once again our conviction that the only fair and real solution to the war and to the whole conflict is a solution between the two states. We must work on this solution right now and not in an uncertain future.

The only fair and real solution to the war and to the whole conflict is a solution between the two states – and we must work on this solution right now

We believe that we must recover the spirit and feeling which are intrinsically so Mediterranean, of community, solidarity and care for others. We must recover the idea of mutual benefit, getting rid of any paternalistic vision. We trust that the resumption of this spirit will contribute to finding a way out through justice and peace.

It is an opportunity for this conference to be held just the day before the meeting of the foreign ministers of the countries of the Union for the Mediterranean, in which representatives of almost all the states of the Mediterranean basin will work for a response to the conflict and the challenges facing the Mediterranean. I would like to congratulate all the participants, in particular for the Barcelona Declaration that you will sign today, and for the initiative to create a group of experts that will prepare a position to be presented in the framework of the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the Barcelona Process.

As I already said, nothing useful can be done by the institutions without the contribution of civil society. And in the case of Mediterranean policies and politics, this is even more clear. Please, be active, take part in this process, make your voice heard. You are better equipped than many of us. You bear your own responsibility. We need your vision. We need your assessment. The declaration that you will adopt today is important because it will be the result of one of the very few real discussions between various positions and sensibilities.

It can be a major step in the right direction. Please, do your best, be open-minded, be generous and forward-looking.



PART II

BUILDING PEACE
IN TIMES OF
POLARISATION:
KEY CHALLENGES

THE FUTURE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

Miguel Ángel Moratinos. High Representative
for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations

On September 11, 2001, I was in Gaza, about to meet with President Arafat. In the time it took me from the restaurant to President Arafat's office, one of the towers in the World Trade Center in New York had collapsed. When I entered President Arafat's office, he was waiting for me, standing in front of the TV, and we both saw how the second tower was crumbling. We were appalled, shocked, and worried because we immediately realised what was happening would have tremendous consequences.

On my way back to Tel Aviv, I gathered with my team. We all agreed that this cruel attack was going to change the course of history. Nevertheless, I was optimistic. For some reason, I believed that the United States would respond cautiously, trying to address the root causes of such an attack. Unfortunately, I was wrong.

The attack came to symbolise a violent confrontation between the Islamic world and the West. In the aftermath of 9/11, President George W. Bush launched a global "War on Terror" and throughout the first years of the new millennium, the world witnessed the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions — live on TV — while at the same time, more terrorist attacks occurred worldwide: Madrid, London, Bali...

It is precisely in that context that the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) was born. The initiative was announced by the Spanish President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero at the

United Nations General Assembly on 24 September 2004. The goal was to build an instrument to defeat terror, not militarily, but through diplomacy and dialogue, because we will not defeat terrorism solely through military means or a security-based approach. Rather, we need to go to the root causes. And not only that: if we don't understand or respect the "other", if we don't consider cultural and religious differences, if we don't foster social cohesion and a culture of peace among ourselves, we are bound to fail.

That is what the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations stands for. The word "Alliance" refers to the aim of building bridges between the Western world and the Islamic and the Arab world, to fight intolerance, hate speech, and rejection toward the "other", and foster the values of compassion, tolerance, and mutual understanding.

If the last two decades have taught us anything, it is that there is no "clash of civilizations", as Professor Samuel Huntington predicted in 1992. Rather, we are witnessing a "clash of ignorances", or perhaps more accurately, a clash over geopolitical power under the pretext of a presumed cultural or religious shock. This narrative is not only misleading but also dangerous. Religions do not cause violence; it is the individuals who are violent and who, sometimes in the name of religion, try to justify atrocious crimes.

If the last two decades have taught us anything, there is no “clash of civilizations”... we are witnessing a “clash of ignorances”

Since the beginning of time, violence and the annihilation of the adversary have brought unspeakable episodes of death and destruction. The Mediterranean has been the epicentre of wars and revolts for centuries, and it continues to be in turmoil. Yet we are experiencing a paradigm shift in global governance. Everyone agrees that we are in a multipolar world. The era of one superpower supremacy is gone. This reconfiguration of the world's architecture offers the opportunity to rethink the future of the Euro-Mediterranean region.

As Mediterraneans, we must come together to shape our future. Because we are at a turning point, and we must take responsibility. As the French Lebanese author Amin Maalouf states, the Mediterranean is not an existing reality, but something we, as Mediterranean people, must build daily.

This reconfiguration of the world's architecture offers the opportunity to rethink the future of the Euro-Mediterranean region

The most urgent thing is to stop the war in Gaza. The recognition of the Palestinian State should be the first step toward the widely accepted formula of the

“Two-State Solution”. We already know there is no alternative. Half-measures and declarations of intent are no longer useful.

It is not only an existential conflict between two communities, two nations, and two narratives – the Israeli and the Palestinian –, but what is at stake is the credibility and viability of a system of international governance that has proven to be incapable of stopping a dehumanising drift that is already among the most fateful moments in the history of humanity.

We should create with civil society a permanent mobilisation for peace. The international community has been obsessing over security and has neglected peace. But there will not be security without peace. However, we should not limit our efforts to putting an end to the Israel-Palestine conflict, we must work to rebuild the Euro-Mediterranean space.

We must not let third countries decide the future of the Mediterranean. Only by taking action ourselves, as the people of the Mediterranean, will we be able to solve the conflicts that affect our region and build an area of peace and prosperity

One thing is clear: we must not let third countries decide the future of the Mediterranean. Only by taking action ourselves, as the people of the Mediterranean, will we be able to solve the conflicts that affect our region and build an area of peace and prosperity.

WHO DRIVES WHOM? CONFLICT, POLARISATION AND HATE: THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

Milica Pesic. Executive Director,
Media Diversity Institute

A FISH ROTS FROM THE HEAD

I've been grappling with the way media tells the story of war since the days when Balkan warlords and politicians — long before anyone asked us what we truly needed — decided that what we had wasn't enough for their ambitions, and turned us, their "subjects", into pawns of conflict. As someone sceptical about the very existence of any Gods, let alone the ones who taught us that religion was "opium for the masses", I immediately joined those who believed in ethical journalism, journalism as a public good, regardless of whether we are in peace or war. My early experiences as a journalist in the Balkans sparked a lifelong investigation into how the media can fuel conflict.

Once people start seeing others as enemies, driven by leaders, the media, or by both, it is much harder to see humanity as something we share and should share

In situations of conflict, individuals instinctively seek safety and a sense of belonging. Their loyalties often shift towards their ethnic, religious, national, or political groups. It's a deep human instinct. It, in turn, makes it easier for anger and hate to spread. This is what the

warlords count on. And this is why their responsibility lies before the media's responsibility. Once people start seeing others as enemies, driven by leaders, the media, or by both, it is much harder to see humanity as something we share and should share.

PROPAGANDA VS. PROFESSIONALISM

"When you stand at the site of a massacre, two things happen. First, you wonder about the depths of the human spirit. And then you ask yourself how many lies can be told about it."

Robert Fisk, the veteran war correspondent for *The Independent* newspaper in London, asked that question while investigating an atrocity in Kosovo in the mid-1990s, but he wasn't thinking just about the sides fighting in the conflict. He was also challenging journalists who take part in the conflict.

Why do we journalists lie in this kind of situation? Is our patriotism stronger than our professionalism? Is our ethnic, religious background stronger than our duty to tell "the truth as best as we can establish it," as Clare Hollingworth put it in 1939 while covering the German invasion of Poland?

It seems that not much has changed since William Howard Russell of *The Times*, London, went to the Crimea in 1854 and became the first civilian war correspondent. Since he asked "*Am I to tell these things or to hold my tongue,*" *the media has been struggling. More often than not, failing to provide reports that*

offer “ordinary citizens full, truthful and immediate information about what is being done in their name,” as Philip Knightley, an expert in war reporting issues, once wrote.

In journalism worth its name, there should be no different rules for journalists — one set that is applicable during peacetime and another for war. Referring to the other side — to Tutsi minority as “cockroaches” and encouraging violence as Rwandan *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* did during the 1994 war, or referring to other ethnic groups as “evil-doers”, “cut-throats”, “commando-terrorist groups” as TV Serbia did during the Balkan wars, or referring to Palestinians as pigs, dogs, and bloodsucking vampires — media driven propaganda directly fuels conflict and often leads to genocide.

Media users in Russia and, more or less, the rest of the world, have been confronted with two starkly different portrayals of the current war in Ukraine. Or, the conflict in Gaza: *Haaretz's* representation of war seems like a world apart from the one provided by the media close to Netanyahu.

In journalism worth its name, there should be no different rules for journalists — one set that is applicable during peacetime and another for war

The rules for propagandist media are simple: we are angels, they are devils. Or, to paraphrase an American general's comment about news reports following the attack on Pearl Harbor, tell people nothing until the war's over — then tell them who won. In the case of Serbia, the rule would be “Tell the people lies until the war's over — then tell them we won”.

The sad truth is that many journalists have long accepted the rules of wartime reporting without ever questioning them. “There was no need for censor-

ship of our dispatches, we were our own censors,” Philip Gibbs, a *Times* correspondent, proudly admitted during World War I. More recently, John MacArthur, in his book on media coverage of the Gulf War, *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda*, quotes an American journalist covering the Gulf War who said that there was no need for censorship since he was “first an American, then a journalist.”

Putting “patria” before profession has long been the “holy duty” of many journalists. In the early 1990s, the state-controlled TV Serbia (TVS), which is supposed to be a public broadcaster, fired more than 1,300 of its 7,000 employees who refused to participate in its war propaganda. But it easily managed to fill these jobs with new workers ready to be “brave and honoured servants of the fatherland”, as one of the TVS war reporter used to say. TVS is not doing better today. Students who are asking for fair coverage of their protest are on national television compared to the Reich Press Chamber.

CONFLICT AS A DRIVER OF POLARISATION AND HATE

The answer to the question of whether the conflict causes polarisation and hatred, or the other way around, is like answering the question of the chicken and the egg. Many political and media experts claim (or have been claiming) that the Balkan conflict was the result of centuries-long ethnic hatred in the region. Those of us who grew up in post-WW2 Yugoslavia struggled to find much evidence for these claims. In fact, it was the opposite, political leaders actively used ethnicity, and religion in particular, as a pretext to fuel the conflict. It was easy to use religion for this purpose because most of us did not know much about religion, either our own or the religion of other groups in our country. A wide spread of religious literacy among journalists and the public played a significant role in amplifying the hatred encouraged by the propagandist media in the region. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former

Yugoslavia provided sufficient evidence that hatred was spread through the media.

Nowadays, the *new media* ecosystem includes web-pages, mobile apps, and social media platforms — all far less regulated than so-called “legacy media” — and is becoming far more aggressive in shaping the public views about key events. Many organisations are fighting back. The Media Diversity Institute (MDI), along with numerous partners in Europe, the MENA region, and Asia, are among them. Through the monitoring of the media, these organisations can easily see the role the new media is playing in enhancing polarisation, hate, and populism, in particular among young people.⁴

The MDI leads the EU-wide “Get the Trolls Out!” project, launched in 2015, which empowers civil society organizations to monitor and analyse online hate speech, debunk antisemitic narratives, and keep the audience at the forefront by developing inclusive content for social and legacy media. The MDI was also instrumental in co-creating the methodology for the AI-driven European Observatory of Online Hate (EOOH). It is helping activists to create and disseminate videos, memes, cartoons and blogs that have proven ability to garner mass audiences, particularly among young people. Under one of its projects, the MDI fostered and trained a cohort of more than 900 “upstanders” — individuals tasked with debunking or deflating agenda-driven narratives. All MDI monitoring projects include sustained, trust-based engagement with social media companies. They benefit from the MDI’s status as a *Trusted Flogger* with both Google and Meta. Success stories are numerous. In 2020, Meta’s decision to delete all Holocaust denial content was partly motivated by representations made by MDI and its partners. In the same year, engagement with Facebook’s conspiracy

theory team in Washington and Brussels resulted in Facebook escalating an internal review of its policy on QAnon by removing all content related to QAnon as a result of its links to violent social movements. As a result of the monitoring findings and ensuing discussions with social media platforms in Sri Lanka, the MDI documented an increased frequency of updates to their community standards and guidelines. Regardless of the answer to the chicken and egg question, one thing is certain: civil society organizations are an essential part of the answer.

One thing is certain: civil society organizations are an essential part of the answer

FROM TRADITIONAL TO SOCIAL MEDIA AND BACK

In 1976, in the post-Watergate and post-Vietnam War period, 72% of Americans trusted the news media. Today, the figure is 34%. In the post-truth era we are going through, recognising disinformation, misinformation, and fake stories in particular in social media, has become a challenge even for media-literate people. Studies show that it is social media where the news comes from. Yet, they are the main spreaders of hate, prejudice, and discriminatory content since they are far less regulated than the legacy media. Massive consumption and engagement on social media make them a dangerous tool for social divisions. This is where the legacy media has stepped in by doing the fact-checking. The problem is that the public’s trust in journalism has dropped significantly along with its interest in social media. The latest Reuters’ Digital News Report 2024 says

4. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/media-and-polarisation-europe-strategies-local-practitioners-address-problematic-reporting-may-2023_en

trust in news sits at 40%, four points lower than at the peak of the Coronavirus pandemic. Why is that? *Journalism Manifesto* (2021), one of the most radical academic works on the discrepancy between what journalists should do as opposed to what they do, argues that over the last several decades, mainstream journalism has been driven by elites, written by elites and consumed by elites. Ordinary people, the marginalised and vulnerable ones in particular, do not find or recognise themselves in contemporary journalism. This is why the authors of the *Manifesto* recommend dramatic changes – saying journalism has to revolutionise or die.

The demands for journalism to understand social needs, to adapt and transform, and to look for the ways it can contribute to social cohesion at times of hatred and polarisation have been strong for a long time. The MDI work done through the MEDIADELCOME project has demonstrated that some media outlets are already doing it by practising deliberative journalism. As another way to combat hate, polarisation and radicalisation in and by the media, the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) listed 10 recommendations, media literacy being one of them. Recognising the complexity of the media and polarisation issues, the RAN recommends “the creation of structures and platforms which facilitate cross-collaboration between practitioners, researchers, policymakers, journalists, news outlet owners and technology companies.” Organisations that operate in the field of media and diversity see this recommendation as crucial. However, most of the funders in this sector

prefer to support individual stakeholders rather than look for cross-collaboration.

WHERE THERE'S A WILL, THERE'S A WAY

When the media echoes only the loudest and enraged voices, it creates a picture of the world that feels even more divided than it truly is. People stop trusting each other. They begin to believe that anyone who looks, speaks, or thinks differently is the worst enemy.

But the media can also be a force for good. It can share real human stories from both sides of a conflict. It can focus on the “third side” in the conflict – refugees, showing acts of kindness and courage, and the resilience that reminds us of our shared humanity. Projects like The Forgiveness Project or The Peace Factory, which use storytelling to break down walls instead of building them, are good examples of creative, inspiring, and impactful efforts.

Whether [conflicts] lead to more hatred or more healing depends on the stories journalists tell, the truths they convey, and the platforms we choose to trust

At the end of the day, conflicts will always be there, most of them solved sooner or later. Whether they lead to more hatred or more healing depends very much on the stories journalists tell, the truths they convey, and the platforms we choose to trust.

BEYOND RHETORIC:
ADVANCING COHERENT
DIPLOMACY TO
COUNTER EURO-MED
POLARISATION

Bichara Khader. Emeritus professor,
Catholic University of Louvain (UCLouvain)

Since the implosion of the Soviet Union, there has been a surge in fearmongering and xenophobic discourse; deep divides between peoples, cultures, religions, nationalities; increasing internal polarisation between communities, parties, and social groups; and external polarisation between countries and hegemons. Whether externally or internally, those who do not share our views, options, visions and desires are seen as “the new enemies”. Hate speech has sharpened. Tribalistic instincts have been on the rise. Walls have been erected symbolising closed-mindedness, shutting our minds and hearts to others. They falsely protect and surely separate.

Walls have been erected symbolising closed-mindedness, shutting our minds and hearts to others. They falsely protect and surely separate

Social media opened the door for misinformation, manipulation and proliferation of hate speech. Even in the individual sphere, notions of courtesy, respect, and tolerance have receded. While we are all interconnected, binary attitudes are prevailing: Us versus Them, autochthons versus Immigrants, the axis of

Good versus the axis of Evil, Friends versus Enemies. Dehumanisation of the Other (different, foreign, political rival, etc.) reflects an unwillingness to imagine a shared humanity or common challenges, and to expand our “little insulated little worlds.” Dehumanisation absolves one from questioning its own narrative and to understand the legitimate grievance of the other side. Often, it leads to massacres and even genocide. The Palestinian-Israeli protracted “conflict” is a case in point.

It is the responsibility of all of us, journalists, youth, religious leaders, social activists, to “knock down walls” of fear, incomprehension and disrespect, by calling to positive action, shifting mindsets, and helping us to “step into the shoes of others” by making the unfamiliar feel more familiar to us, and by “recognising ourselves in the culture of the other.”

POLARISATION AS AN IMPEDIMENT TO SHARED HUMANITY

We live in an “interconnected world”. Yet, the international system is enmeshed in damaging rivalries and polarisation that increase our inability to work together. This failure of adopting a bonding strategy has been recently highlighted in the Human Development Report 2023-2024: “Breaking the gridlock: reimagining cooperation in a polarized world”. The same negative assessment has been made by the World Bank’s Report “The Great Reversal”. Both reports

highlight not only underinvestment and mismanagement, but also alarming domestic and international polarisation, and therefore declining aptitude to collectively face up to common challenges.

What makes things worse is that external shocks can exacerbate domestic polarisation. “This creates a vicious circle”, pinpoints the Egmond Institute, as “increased domestic polarisation complicates international cooperation,” disconnects us from our shared humanity, leading to the incapacity of societies and countries to deliver global public goods, and to promote multilateralism, which is the condition sine qua non of sustainable development, global peace and shared humanity.

Polarisation refers to the concept of “in-group” and “out-group”. The concept illustrates how quickly we align with those who share similarities with us. But if we are not confronted with “other thinking”, or “other worldviews”, we end up killing our critical capacity, our learning process, our ability to experience empathy and our desire to reconnect and establish our shared humanity.

“Increased domestic polarisation complicates international cooperation,” disconnects us from our shared humanity, leading to the incapacity of societies and countries to deliver global public goods

POLARISATION, HATE SPEECH AND CONFLICT

Polarisation can be and is often a catalyst for distrust and conflict. When social groups or states stick to sharper opposing positions on any issue, this can lead to growing distrust, to demonisation of the rival,

to fearmongering and warmongering, and finally to effective confrontation. If polarisation often leads to conflicting views or effective warfare, the opposite is also true: conflicts exacerbate polarisation. 7 October and the Israeli devastation of Gaza have triggered “a war of narratives”, exacerbating tensions within societies, universities, big firms, etc., exposing the growing rift between the West and Global South, fanning the flames of antisemitism and islamophobia, and fracturing the rules-based international order.

If the United Nations sounded the alarm bell, it is because the upsurge of dehumanising language has led in the past to indescribable suffering (atrocities, ethnic cleansing and even genocide) in many countries like Nazi Germany, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and, today, within each single country, mainly in Europe and in the USA, it threatens the very core of democracies and pluralistic societies.

The upsurge of dehumanising language has led in the past to indescribable suffering – and today, it threatens the very core of democracies and pluralistic societies

The threats of hate speech did not recede in our present times: suffice to skip through the various statements of far-right groups in Europe regarding immigrants or Muslims or read the flurry of genocidal incitements by Israeli officials dehumanising the Palestinians of Gaza.

Festering conflicts, exacerbated nationalism, perceived fictitious or real threats, increased flows of “illegal” migration, economic volatility, emergence of new powers, social media, digital technology, pandemics have given rise to waves of hate speech, targeting political rivals, foreigners, migrants, women, minorities and homosexuals, etc., thus undermining

the cause of peace, respect for human rights, social cohesion, equality, inclusion, stability, sustained development, and shared values.

OUR SHARED HUMANITY TUMBLES IN THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN REGION: THE FACTS, THE REMEDIES

Polarisation, hate speech, dehumanisation of the “other” and violence are worldwide phenomena. They have curtailed our “sharing humanity”. The Euro-Mediterranean region has not been spared by the scourge of polarisation, distrust, misunderstanding, fear and violence. On the contrary, upsurge of hate speech, fear of immigration’ flows “swamping the European continent”, brandishing fake social threats such as the “Islamisation of Europe” have flourished, mainly since the collapse of the Soviet Union, giving rise to far-right narratives.

Because of geographic proximity and human connections, Euro-Med relations are today under severe strain. Already in 2002, Romano Prodi set up a Group of Wisemen on “dialogue between peoples and cultures in the Euro-Mediterranean area” to counter the narrative of Samuel Huntington on the Clash of Civilizations. Unfortunately, not only has the intercultural rift not been bridged, but it has even widened, putting in jeopardy social peace within European countries and placing the whole Mediterranean region on the edge of the abyss.

To avert a total collapse of our shared humanity in the Euro-Mediterranean region, two main tasks are urgent. First of all, to debunk the spurious rhetoric about the peril of Islamisation of Europe, stop comparing a religion (Islam) with a region (Europe), and stop the weaponisation of the migration issue for electoral gains. Secondly, to seriously engage in the resolution of the Palestinian question, which is the keystone of shared humanity in the Mediterranean region.

Islam as “an indispensable enemy” has been at the core of Huntington’s thesis on the “Clash of Civilizations”.

To face the threat of Islam (eventually in collusion with the Confucian civilisation) Huntington suggests that the West should promote greater cooperation and unity with its own civilization, limit the expansion of military strength of Confucian and Islamic states, and maintain a military superiority. Implicitly, Huntington purports that the need of the West to have an enemy is to affirm and define its own identity. The thesis implies that Islam is the antithesis of the West. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the “red danger” was replaced by the “green danger”, which is the colour of Islam. This fallacious thinking has widely circulated. But it is polarising, pessimistic, and based on the premise that there is no convergence with Islamic religion and values, that Islam is a rigid, immutable system incompatible with European modernism, tolerance and democracy.

Samuel Huntington died in 2008, but his theory still widely circulates. Suffice to look at the statements of far-right leaders in Spain, Germany and elsewhere. Opinion polls indicate that an average of 60% of Europeans either fear or reject Muslim presence in Europe. Such a situation is not conducive to confidence-building and good working relation in the Mediterranean region, and is a barrier to “shared humanity”.

As European politics are drifting to the far right, this is a bad omen for the future, as populist demagogues are tempted to exploit peoples’ social, political and economic disarray for electoral gains. There is a real fear that new walls will be erected putting in jeopardy the objective of “shared humanity”.

That’s why the first urgent task for European countries is to reject Huntington’s paradigm of the “Clash of Civilizations”, combat hate speech, curb radicalisation, enact laws to better integrate Muslim communities, show respect for them, restore trust but at the same time combat Muslim militant groups that try to discredit European accepted norms and abhor shared values.

There is a real fear that new walls will be erected putting in jeopardy the objective of “shared humanity”

Palestine defines what Europe is. We may even say that Palestine is a European question, as Europe has been “part and parcel of the Palestinian issue” since its very beginning. From 1948, the main concern of European and Western countries was to secure the existence and consolidation of the State of Israel, to shield it from its Arab environment. The forced exile of two thirds of the Palestinian people (some 750,000) in the first ethnic cleansing was seen as “collateral damage”, and for many Europeans the Palestinian Question became a “refugee problem”, which has to be dealt with as a “humanitarian issue”.

The historical context in Europe and the geopolitical transformation in the Arab World offer some clues to understand European primordial sympathy towards the Zionist movement. The Shoah has produced in Europe an immense feeling of guilt: European states and public opinion, in general, felt that they have a “moral debt” towards Israel. By contrast, events in the Arab World, in a context of decolonisation, were perceived as largely hostile to the West, in general, and to European interests, in particular.

In such a context, Israel strategic relevance was bolstered: many Europeans perceived Israel not only as a “safe shelter” for the Jews, but also as a “shield” against a turbulent anti-Western environment and a “stronghold” protecting European interests. The participation of Israel in the tripartite aggression against Egypt in 1956 is a clear indication of the role which has to be assumed by the newly-born “Jewish State”. This is the general picture on the eve of the Rome Treaty (1957), establishing the European Economic Community (EEC).

Since the early 1970s, Europe's position has moved slowly but surely from total neglect of the political dimension of the Palestinian Question (1957-1967) to the recognition of the “legitimate rights “of the Palestinians (1973), the need for “a homeland” for the “Palestinian People”(1977), and their right to “self-determination”, which should be achieved through negotiations with the “participation of the PLO” (Venice Declaration, 1980), which implies a “Palestinian state”(Berlin Declaration, 1999), living side by side with Israel, with “Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian State” (EU's statement, 2009). In many other statements, the EU condemned Israel's “occupation” of Palestinian and Syrian territories, denounced the “settlement policy”, reiterated the urgency of the “Two-State Solution”, and insisted upon the necessity of having a sovereign, viable and contiguous Palestinian state (Paris Conference, 15 January 2017). In more recent declarations, the EU reiterated the 2009 statement that it “will not recognize any changes in the pre-1967 borders including Jerusalem, others than those agreed upon by the parties.”

Yet, in total mismatch between the discourse and practice, the EU continued its work relations with Israel, deepening its trade relations and allowing Israel to participate in its research programmes. Toothless diplomacy and “de facto” acquiescence to Israeli policies in the occupied territories have tarnished European image and credibility in the Southern Mediterranean region.

The events of 7 October marked a horrific attack by Hamas. The trauma it generated, particularly for Israeli civilians, is undeniable and must be acknowledged. However, as UN Secretary-General António Guterres aptly reminded the international community, it was not the beginning of history. The current violence cannot be understood in isolation from a broader context – namely, 77 years of systematic impunity and the absence of accountability regarding Israel's treatment of Palestinians.

The ongoing onslaught in Gaza has gone “over the top” and posed a significant challenge to the EU: it has torn apart European countries (with divergent voting in the UN General Assembly), laid bare divided leadership in EU institutions, and showcased its perceived double standard in its dealing with Russian aggression and Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. It increased the chasm between popular sentiment and EU’s toothless diplomacy, despite the unrelenting efforts by Josep Borrell to shatter the EU’s apathy and to raise its credibility.

What boggles the mind is that some European leaders have been dubbed “antisemitic” because they asked for a ceasefire or simply because they accused Israel of violating the Geneva Conventions. The recognition of the State of Palestine by Norway, Spain, Ireland and Slovenia, in 2024, has infuriated Israeli Government, prompting an angry response saying that recognition of Palestine amounts to a “reward for terrorism”. Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative, was accused of “antisemitism”, just because he showed empathy with Palestinian suffering and accused Israel of weaponising starvation against Palestinians.

Because of its historic responsibility and its geographic proximity, Europe must show a sense of purpose and wise leadership. It has at its disposal many levers of influence. Shelving its divisions is of paramount importance for its voice to be heard, its role to be recognised, and its image to be burnished. In sum, it must walk the talk.

Only by helping to forge a lasting solution, ending Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, can

Europe become a geopolitical player in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Accusations of double standards have tarnished the European image and standing. It is not sufficient to “speak about shared humanity” or to present Europe as “flag-bearer of civilization” while bombs are raining down on innocent people, killing, injuring, maiming and mutilating almost 10% of the total population of Gaza. Sharing humanity should not be a rhetorical exercise, it should translate in a vigorous and concerted effort to restore a shattered rules-based order, to sanction those who violate international law, to show empathy for the victims, all the victims, and open a horizon of hope for Palestinians and Israelis alike. This requires coherence and sense of purpose.

The message to Europe, then, is simple:

Don’t talk—act.

Don’t say—show.

Don’t promise—prove.

Sharing humanity should not be a rhetorical exercise, it should translate in a vigorous and concerted effort to restore a shattered rules-based order

This is the only path by which Europe can preserve the relevance of its values and keep alive the vision of shared humanity in the Mediterranean and beyond.

CONFLICT, HATE, ANGER, AND THE ILLUSION OF PERMANENT SECURITY

Dirk Moses. City College of New York

To assert that conflict drives polarisation and hatred is partially true. No doubt, intense emotions accompany and are driven by conflict. Sometimes they can be categorised as hatred. It has two aspects. First, hate involves extremely negative generalisations about groups – describing “the Arabs” or “the Jews” as homogenous, morally inferior entities – and holding individuals responsible for what other members of their ascribed group do. Second, it is marked by dehumanisation: the opposite of “shared humanity”. Calling Palestinians “animals” is an example. Third, the outgroup is viewed as dispositionally evil and ill-intentioned towards the ingroup, which in turn motivates people to “do evil to, remove, and even eliminate the outgroup” (Halperin, 2016: 43).

Anger about injustice is not the same as hatred. While hatred focuses on extreme perceptions of the outgroup, anger is usually focused on the (often objective) act of injustice such as oppression and violence, and can motivate (often constructive, peaceful) collective action to challenge injustices (van Zomeren et al., 2012). To confuse or equate anger and hatred can mean denying the right of oppressed groups a normal and understandable, affective and behavioural response to the injustice they experience (Vollhardt & Twali, 2016).

Anger about injustice is not the same as hatred

Actors in political struggles do not necessarily make such distinctions. Menachem Begin, the leader of the Irgun (National Military Organization) paramilitary and later prime minister of Israel, extolled the virtues of hatred in his memoir *The Revolt*. It detailed the Zionist struggle against the British Mandate and its Palestinian Arab citizens, imagining it as a national liberation struggle, although the latter comprised the vast majority of the population.

Actors in political struggles do not necessarily make such distinctions

It is axiomatic that those who fight have to hate – something or somebody. And we fought. We had to hate first and foremost, the horrifying, age-old, inexcusable utter defencelessness of our Jewish people, wandering through millennia, through a cruel world, to the majority of whose inhabitants the defencelessness of the Jews was a standing invitation to massacre them. We had to hate the humiliating disgrace or the homelessness of our people. We had to hate – as any nation worthy of the name must and always will hate – the rule of the foreigner, rule, unjust and unjustifiable per se, foreign rule in the land of our ancestors, in our own country. We had to hate the barring of

the gates of our country to our own brethren, trampled and bleeding and crying out for help in a world morally deaf (Begin, 1977: xxvi).

Hatred, then, was the motivating emotion for what Begin called the Zionist “revolutionary war of liberation” (Sofer, 1986). He may as well have said anger because that war against British rule in Palestine in the 1940s aimed to end what he regarded as the illegitimate occupation of historic Jewish land and to usher in Jewish sovereignty.

History and our observation persuaded us that if we could succeed in destroying the government’s prestige in Eretz Israel, the removal of its rule would follow automatically. Thence forward we gave no peace to this weak spot. Throughout all the years of our uprising, we hit at the British government’s prestige, deliberately, tirelessly, unceasingly (Begin, 1977: 52).

To that end, in 1946 the Irgun bombed the King David Hotel where British headquarters was housed, killing about 90 people. In the event, the majority of Irgun violence was directed towards the Palestinian majority population. Most notoriously, Irgun and Lehi paramilitaries massacred over 100 Palestinian villagers of Deir Yassin in April 1948, and via such terror encouraged the flight of others. About the Nakba, he wrote blandly, “Of the about 800,000 Arabs who lived on the present territory of the State of Israel, only some 165,000 are still there. The political and economic significance of this development can hardly be overestimated” (Begin, 1977: 164).

He denied this violence was terrorism, because it was perpetrated for a just case. “The historical and linguistic origins of the political term ‘terror’ prove it cannot be applied to a revolutionary war of liberation,” he insisted. While terrorism aimed to instil fear, he explained,

a revolutionary war does not aim at instilling fear. Its object is to overthrow a regime and to set up a new regime in its place. In a revolutionary war both sides use force. Tyranny is armed. Otherwise it would be liquidated overnight. Fighters for freedom must arm; otherwise they would be crushed overnight (Begin, 1951: 100-101).

Conveniently, he later denied that Palestinian resistance to the Israeli conquest of the West Bank, which he renamed Judea and Samaria and where he encouraged Jewish settlement, was a legitimate revolutionary war of national liberation: he denounced it as terrorism.

Palestinians see it the other way around. Armed resistance groups deploy the same arguments as Begin in justifying their paramilitary resistance against Israeli occupation, including against the State of Israel itself. The Hamas wager that its murderous raid of 7 October 2023 would spark a general uprising of Palestinians living between “the river and sea” even repeats the strategic logic of the Jewish Zealots in their revolt against Roman rule in the first century AD (Rapaport, 1984).

Both cases were marked by massacre and atrocities that suggest hatred and what the scholar Edward Weisband calls the “macabresque”: the “dramaturgy and theatricality” of the killing that reveals as much about its motivations as the fact of killing (Weisband, 2017). These examples – and one could invoke many others – indicate that hatred and anger are generated by conquest, foreign occupation, genocide, deportation, and exile – even concerning events thousands of years ago. The intense emotions they evoke end when they end.

Until they do, international law is an important resource to regulate the potential for massive violence. The United Nations court, the International Court of Justice, has given its opinions on the occupation of Palestinian territory in an advisory opinion in July 2024: it is illegal (ICJ, 2024). The International

Criminal Court has indicted Hamas and Israeli leaders for war crimes and crimes against humanity, although the Hamas leaders have been killed in the interim.

Hatred and anger are generated by conquest, foreign occupation, genocide, deportation, and exile – even concerning events thousands of years ago

The current conflict, like the outlandish Russian invasions of Ukraine starting in 2014, shows that great powers and smaller states still regard warfare – military solutions – as the path to their security. The point of the United Nations – and the European Union – is to stand against military solutions in favour of peace and security. However, the latter notion can legitimate massive state violence in the name of “legitimate self-defence”. To break down this misused notion, it is necessary to understand a basic distinction between security, which is legitimate, and the striving for permanent security, which is illegitimate. Every state, every people, should enjoy security: immunity to immediate threats in internationally recognised borders. Tension with neighbours can be regulated by international law. Permanent security, by contrast, seeks absolute safety, meaning guarantees against future threats from putative enemies within and outside one’s borders. That means pre-emptively attacking possible threats. It is future oriented and constitutively paranoid. A sign of permanent security aspirations is talk of “never again” allowing a hostile entity to represent a threat. It means its total destruction (Moses, 2021).

The Israel military campaigns in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria are driven by permanent security. Its leaders regularly talk about never again allowing Hamas and Hezbollah to threaten Israel. Rather than negotiate

a ceasefire, its forces continue to pursue them relentlessly, killing tens of thousands of Palestinian and Lebanese civilians in the process.

They lay waste entire territories – Gaza and Southern Lebanon – to create buffer and settlement zones: for security purposes. This aim entails the total destruction of Palestinian society: its schools, universities, hospitals, and agriculture. Now plans are afoot to deport the Palestinian population of Gaza. Whether these policies and practices amount to genocide is for the International Court of Justice to determine. It is not a sign of hatred for people to emotionally protest this conduct. People understand when civilizational norms – which international law codifies – are being violated. They understand the difference between self-defence and permanent security.

It is necessary to understand a basic distinction between security, which is legitimate, and the striving for permanent security, which is illegitimate

Many commentators still propose the “Two-State Solution” to resolve the situation. Why it is impossible to realise can be understood in security concerns too, quite apart from the political and logistical challenge of dealing with the half a million settlers on Palestinian territory. The Israeli establishment and most Israelis – not just the current government – rejects the Two-State Solution because they regard a Palestinian state on 1967 borders as an existential security risk. The Zionist understanding of Jewish security in the region is incompatible with Palestinian autonomous existence, let alone security. Zionist understandings of Jewish security in the region seem to be tantamount to permanent security: total domination of Palestinians, while trying to reduce their number, and total domination of the region (Moses,

2011). This catastrophic sensibility, which precedes the Holocaust but was obviously intensified by it, is to a great extent the result of the Jewish experience of European antisemitism: centuries of discrimination, degradation, and pogroms.

It is hardly surprising that a movement of nation revival and redemption would emerge in the nineteenth century, as they did among other small nations of Europe. Europeans had long understood the intense emotions generated by national liberation movements. Consider Goya's "disasters of war" sketches that depict in unforgettable form violence civilian participation in repelling French soldiers in the Peninsular War between 1808 and 1814. The legend of Egmont, the Dutch hero of the resistance to Spanish rule in the sixteenth century, was immortalised in Goethe's play dramatising his story and then in Beethoven's famous overture, commissioned in 1809.

Europeans have understood through two world wars and centuries before that in the terrible wars of religion that permanent security – absolute safety through total domination – is a terrible dystopia that leads to permanent war and instability. The European Union represents the miracle of common humanity via a humane security: living together by building trust

and solving conflicts via the law. Having exported catastrophic sensibilities to the Ottoman Empire that caused what is called the Arab-Israel conflict, Europe is responsible for helping solve it by transitioning from illegal and illegitimate permanent security aspirations to legitimate ones.

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Unfortunately, while it defends that principle for Ukraine, it does not do so for Palestine. One researcher has identified "patterned discrepancies" in the EU treatment of the two cases caused by its colonial blindness: "Russia, Ukraine and Israel figure in a Eurocentric temporal-spatial relation to Europe, while Palestine is dispossessed of its history, not set into any relationship to Europe and figures as a partially rights-less subject in official EU discourse" (Huber, 2025: 1). The EU is yet to fully absorb the lessons of World War II.

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DO WOMEN MATTER? BUILDING PEACE IN TIMES OF WAR

Sanam Naraghi-Anderlin. International Civil Society
Action Network

Perhaps I can begin with two illustrative quotes from the speeches of two extraordinary women.

Maha Abu Dayeh Shamas, a Palestinian, and Terry Greenblatt, an Israeli American, who appeared together at the UN Security Council in 2002. It was a time of immense tension. Negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian leaders had broken down, and the peace movement on both sides was in crisis. Normalisation of relationships was off the table, given the persistent inequality in power. Yet these two women had the courage to appear together on the global stage.

Maha Abu Daya Shamas said, “Peace is made between peoples and not between leaders. If we leave it only to men, we get Israeli generals and Palestinians – who will not be defeated. There is no room to negotiate. The participation of women in any future peace process is essential to maintain connection to the realities of the relevant societies... Women have proven themselves to be more dedicated to the process of reaching out... We want to approach peacebuilding in a way that will promote long-term stability, to develop transparent procedures so that any peace will be one between individuals and not politicians.”

Terry Greenblatt said: “We as women have developed the courage to cross the lines of difference drawn between us, which are also the lines drawn inside our heads. And the intelligence to do it

safely, without a gun or a bomb, and to do it productively.

Most importantly, we are learning to shift our positions, finding ourselves moving towards each other, without tearing out our roots in the process. Even when we are women whose very existence and narrative contradicts each other, we will talk. We will not shoot... We are willing to sit together – on the same side of the table – and together look at our complex joint history, with the commitment and intention of not getting up until – in respect and reciprocity – we can get up together and begin our new history and fulfil our joint destiny.”

In thinking about my own work as a woman, a mediator and peace strategist, I often think about these words. I try to imagine how different the world would be if our leaders had heeded the wisdom and the hearts of these two women.

In these brief statements they encapsulate the essence of the global Women, Peace and Security agenda emerging from UN Security Council resolution 1325 in 2000, and the centrality of civil society. The agenda itself exists because in 1998 my colleagues and I – a band of activists and advocates –, young and not so young, initiated a global partnership campaign to bring the experiences of women in times of conflict to the UN Security Council. We built a coalition with governments and UN entities in support.

On 31 October 2000, when diplomats at the Security Council adopted Resolution 1325, they heralded a new moment in our collective history: for the first time ever, the experiences of women in times of war began to be noticed and documented, compared across continents and talked about, not just by our original community of campaigners, but also by world leaders. We ensured that women were not seen as passive victims, but rather as agents of change, essential workers, first responders and those who embodied the responsibility to protect.

We ensured that women were not seen as passive victims, but rather as agents of change, essential workers, first responders and those who embodied the responsibility to protect

Why women in particular? Many claim that the rationale for focusing on women is because they are impacted worse than men in times of war. My experience tells me otherwise. When violence becomes the language of power, it is hellish for everyone, but often women and men are affected differently. Men are more likely to be targeted for harassment, arrest, military recruitment, and assassinations. Young men are most vulnerable, and often limited in their mobility lest they are perceived to be a threat. Meanwhile women are often targeted for sexual violence and to wreak terror in communities. But they are also perceived to be “non-threatening”. This gives them greater freedom to move in public, to convene and organize. But this perceived “peacefulness” or “powerlessness” of women, becomes their superpower in times of crisis. The results spoke for themselves. Some 50% of peace agreements fail within the first five years of being signed. No peace agreement has been imple-

mented fully. But, when women’s peace movements are involved, the agreements hold longer, and implementation is more consistent. In other words, civil society peacebuilders are a necessary and critical ingredient for the success of any process.

I founded ICAN – the International Civil Society Action Network – as an organisation to lead the work from the space of civil society particularly working with women peacebuilders. By 2024, ICAN has been spearheading the Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL), comprising over 85 independent, women-led peacebuilding organisations and 120 individual members in 42 countries. We are a network of national networks – globally connected, locally rooted.

Why do we exist? Because our governments and institutions, which have a primary responsibility to prevent the scourge of war, have abrogated their responsibility to protect civilians. Or worse – they are enablers and perpetrators of that violence. When this occurs, peacebuilders rise from within the community. Many take on the responsibility of protecting their families and communities, those suffering from violence. Whether it is my Lebanese partners assisting internally displaced persons or our Palestinian counterparts standing up to both settler violence against their communities in the West Bank and rising domestic abuse within their communities, they do so, because their leaders have not.

Those who emerge and arise as peacebuilders, oftentimes accidentally, do so by tapping into their cultural and traditional practices, their kinship status, faith, or profession to weave and wield authority and legitimacy. In WASL, our members have an array of skills and professions. Many started lives as educators, social workers, and journalists. Some come from the world of business, others were homemakers and carers. In their diversity there are strong threads of similarity. When crises came to their doorsteps and into their homes, my partners rose to face the challenge. They did not become immersed

in anger or trauma and retribution. Instead, they found the courage and a depth of empathy to reach across the divisions in their societies. Even when their own children were taken and their hearts were shattered, they sought out the humanity in the other.

But peacebuilding is not for the faint hearted, it is riven with risk and insecurity. When societies are polarised and hate fills the vacuum, those who become the bridge builders, also become the targets of that hate. Yet civil society actors persist. While we may speak uncomfortable truth to power, we also offer solutions, roll up our sleeves to get the work done.

In considering the situation in the Middle East, the litany of the failure of past attempts at high level peace-making cannot be ignored. The question is what next?

If I were in charge, while instigating intense negotiations on a ceasefire and ensure humanitarian access, I would also put energy and resources into enabling and empowering two parallel but connected “people’s peace processes” in Israel and in Palestine. The bombs will have to stop ultimately. But even if one or the other side declares a “military victory”, peace will have to come at the tables of negotiations. Trust will have to be built in society, across communities and within them. A military securitised approach is neither sufficient nor sustainable. A political process comprising the same political and diplomatic figures alone, however, will not suffice. Palestinians and Israelis, like Sudanese and Syrian and others, have a right to shape the future, especially those who have taken the responsibility to sustain life and normalcy in the midst of war.

Establishing two parallel people’s national dialogues can ultimately lead to an inclusive peace process where civilians – doctors, teachers, mothers, young people, and religious leaders – can come together with their political representatives to shape a future based on coexistence, collective security, and justice. In Israel, as in Palestine, this dialogue should occur among all community members rather than solely by political elites.

Furthermore, we need a gendered perspective in these peace processes. When women – who have historically been sidelined – lead initiatives for dialogue and reconciliation, they bring unique insights and the courage to bridge differences safely and productively. A distinct characteristic of women-led or feminist processes is the ability to focus the vision toward the future, the uncharted, unwritten, world to come. It is not a denial of the past or the traumas of the past, but it is looking to a future in which the past can be memorialised with the intention of preventing the experience of violence being felt by future generations. So, in focusing on the future, we imagine a fork in the road and two directions to consider: the future we dream of and want, and the one that is a nightmare, and we hope to avoid. Both visions are equally important because, without intentionality and commitment to the positive outcomes, the negative can easily become the default.

A military securitised approach is neither sufficient nor sustainable

This is the challenge for us today: a future of perpetual violence or one of coexistence?

Some may say peace is not possible. I would say, without peace, every other aspect of life is insecure and at risk – health, education, economic wellbeing, human dignity. Some may want us to believe that violence is inevitable, or that it is the human condition. But it isn’t. The use of violence is always a choice. One that can be taken or avoided.

Imagine if the Security Council and our various governments had heeded the advice given to them by the two women peacebuilders in 2002. Where would we be now? And if we listen and act on their message today, where could we be in the next five, ten, or twenty years?



PART III

CIVIL SOCIETY DIALOGUES

INTRODUCTION

A central pillar of the conference was the *Civil Society Dialogues* – thematic working sessions designed to centre the experiences, perspectives, and proposals of civil society actors from across the Euro-Mediterranean region. These sessions focused on three interconnected themes identified as essential for addressing polarisation and rebuilding social trust: the role of women in peacebuilding, hate speech, and youth and social media.

These topics were chosen in response to today's geopolitical realities and the pressing societal challenges they bring. Recognising the central role of gender in conflict dynamics, the participation of women as agents of dialogue and peace was placed at the heart of these discussions. At the same time, the conference paid particular attention to the rise of antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred and the urgent need to confront these manifestations of racism and dehumanisation. Finally, the voices of young people, who are deeply immersed in the digital world and particularly exposed to disinformation and hate-driven narratives, were given prominence – not only

as those affected, but as key actors in shaping alternative narratives of understanding and resilience.

The sessions created a collaborative space to identify current trends, analyse the most pressing challenges, and outline shared priorities for action. The aim was to develop inclusive, rights-based, and forward-looking responses to the dynamics shaping our societies. These dialogues also helped identify where civil society is already leading the way, and where stronger coordination, support, and advocacy are most urgently needed.

The following pages present the main conclusions of these thematic dialogues. They are the result of rich exchanges among invited speakers, discussants, and the wider audience. Please note that all sessions were held under the Chatham House Rule: participants are free to use the information shared, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of speakers or other participants may be revealed. What follows is thus a synthesis of ideas and insights, aimed at amplifying the collective voice of civil society in its call for dignity, justice, and shared humanity.

FROM POLARISATION TO
PEACEBUILDING: ENABLING
WOMEN'S AGENCY

Gender has increasingly gained attention as a central component in peace-building and the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE). Significant progress has been made in acknowledging the importance of adopting gender-sensitive approaches, particularly through international frameworks such as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Resolutions like UNSCR 1325 and 2242 have urged states to incorporate gender perspectives and increase the participation of women in peace and security processes.

However, there remains a persistent gap between policy rhetoric and actual implementation. This session analysed the structural, social, and political challenges to the meaningful participation of women and the integration of an intersectional gender perspective in peace-building efforts. It provided insights into how to move from polarised and securitised approaches towards inclusive peacebuilding, placing women's agency at the heart of conflict transformation efforts.

THE DUAL ROLE OF WOMEN AS VICTIMS AND AGENTS OF CHANGE

Armed conflicts take a disproportionate toll on women — ranging from displacement and sexual violence to the deprivation of basic healthcare. Despite these harsh realities, women are not merely passive victims; they are also essential actors in resilience-

building, mediation, and reconciliation. This duality must be acknowledged: while women bear unique vulnerabilities, they also contribute vital perspectives and solutions, especially in local peace-building and de-radicalisation efforts.

Women are often portrayed as innately peaceful and naturally inclined towards conflict prevention and mediation — represented symbolically as “peace doves”. Although research may show that men resort to violence more frequently than women, these essentialist narratives risk ignoring the complex and diverse roles women play as political actors, community leaders, and participants in conflict. Moreover, they can unintentionally place the burden of peace on women's shoulders. Women must not be viewed as a monolith with a single perspective; they hold diverse opinions and must be afforded full political agency and the freedom to express dissent, even when controversial.

There is also a risk of romanticising women's resilience — portraying them solely as tireless peace-builders and caregivers while overlooking their need for protection. This narrative neglects the very real threats women peace-builders face. In contexts such as Libya, Yemen, and Iraq, they are subjected to physical and emotional abuse, intimidation, arrest, and even death. These women require more than symbolic recognition; they need protection, access to resources, psychological support, and legal reforms

to enable their full and safe participation in public life. It is crucial to foster dense networks of women peace-builders, encourage knowledge exchange, and create robust support structures.

Romanticising women's resilience by portraying them solely as tireless peacebuilders and caregivers often overlooks their own need for protection

NO PEACE TALKS ABOUT US WITHOUT US: INTEGRATING A GENDER PERSPECTIVE INTO PEACEBUILDING

No peace-building process can be legitimate or sustainable without the full and meaningful participation of women. In addition to being a matter of social justice, integrating a gender perspective into peace-building is essential for achieving sustainable solutions. There is growing evidence of a robust correlation between peace agreements signed by female delegates and durable peace. When women are included in peace processes, there is a 64% lower chance of failure compared to when only men are involved.

No peace-building process can be legitimate or sustainable without the full and meaningful participation of women

However, women's inclusion in peace-building processes should not only be about making these processes more effective, but also about fulfilling women's human right to participate in public life. The exclusion of women from ceasefire negotiations,

peace talks, and security institutions weakens the legitimacy and inclusiveness of peace processes.

Despite women's ability to challenge narratives of war, they remain systematically excluded from decision-making, with their voices often labelled as naïve or emotional, and their demands belittled. At the policy level, several important steps have been taken. UNSCR 1325 (2000) emphasised women's participation in peace processes and the incorporation of a gender perspective in peace and security. Later, UNSCR 2242 (2015) explicitly called for the integration of the WPS agenda into P/CVE, recognising the potential of women's organisations in addressing radicalisation. However, significant gaps remain between these international commitments and their implementation. Three key challenges were identified:

First, gender is often treated as synonymous with women, and many initiatives equate gender with women without addressing the broader power dynamics and structures that shape gendered experiences. Integrating gender perspectives requires challenging institutional and cultural norms and meaningfully involving both women and men.

Second, women are frequently stereotyped and essentialised within peace and security efforts, often engaged primarily as "preventers". These essentialist perspectives depoliticise women's actions and reinforce patriarchal norms. Women's participation is frequently framed as a means to make peace-building policies more effective, rather than affirming their intrinsic right to participate.

Third, the securitisation and instrumentalisation of the WPS agenda pose significant challenges. Although UNSCR 2242 acknowledged the role of women in P/CVE, this has led to concerns that women's rights are being instrumentalised to serve security agendas. Such an approach risks reducing women's inclusion to a counter-terrorism strategy, subordinating gender empowerment efforts to national security concerns.

MEANINGFUL INCLUSION OF WOMEN IN SECURITY POLICY-MAKING: A REQUISITE FOR JUSTICE, EQUALITY, AND HUMAN DIGNITY

Tokenism remains a persistent challenge in peacebuilding processes. Too often, women are brought in symbolically — as advisors or observers — without real decision-making power. Ensuring 50% representation of women in peace processes and discussions is not enough. What is needed is a shift from mere inclusion to structural transformation — where women's presence translates into influence, leadership, and agenda-setting. Women must not just be at the table; they must shape the table.

Tokenism persists in peacebuilding processes, where women are too often included symbolically — without real decision-making power

However, meaningful inclusion requires dismantling deeply entrenched barriers. Security institutions continue to be dominated by hegemonic masculinity — a culture that prioritises militarism, strength, and authority, leaving little room for alternative voices or approaches. This creates exclusionary environments where women's contributions are undervalued or ignored. At the same time, civil society — especially in preventive and caregiving roles — is often feminised. Women are overrepresented in this sector but remain largely excluded from state security structures, where real power and resources lie.

To build lasting peace, we must move beyond symbolic gestures and confront the structural imbalance between these spheres. Women's political agency must be recognised not only in community-level initiatives but also in national and regional policy-

making. Integrating a gender perspective into peacebuilding requires overcoming institutional resistance and embedding women's leadership at the core of decision-making processes — across both civil society and state systems.

This transformation also demands a cultural and narrative shift. There is the need to move away from reductive portrayals of women as default victims or peace-makers and, instead, uplift narratives that reflect their resistance, courage, and strategic leadership across the region. Feminist approaches, rooted in solidarity and justice, offer vital tools to challenge narratives of war and to reimagine a future built on care, inclusion, and human dignity.

The future of peace depends not only on ending wars, but also on transforming the very structures that perpetuate violence and exclusion. Including women in security policy-making is essential not only for smarter policies, but also for justice, equality, and human dignity.

WOMEN'S CIVIC PARTICIPATION AS A KEY PILLAR FOR STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES

Women's grassroots involvement plays an essential role in rebuilding the social fabric of divided communities. Organisations such as Women Wage Peace and Women of the Sun, which promote women-led dialogue platforms between Palestinian and Israeli women, actively contribute to community reconciliation and mutual understanding, challenging extremist narratives.

For these organisations, peace is not a theoretical ideal — it is deeply personal, tied to the lives and futures of their children. They have developed a shared “mother's language”, refusing to let grief and suffering be weaponised to justify further violence. Their joint declaration, *The Mother's Call*, unites Palestinian and Israeli women in advocating for a peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflict, grounded in shared aspirations for peace, freedom,

equality, rights, and security for future generations. Their collaborative efforts have gained international recognition, leading to their joint nomination for the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize, which acknowledges their dedication to fostering peace and the pivotal role of women in conflict resolution.

Women's grassroots involvement plays an essential role in rebuilding the social fabric of divided communities

Local-level and community-based work that elevates women leaders and promotes dialogue can create long-term impact. As one speaker noted, "Train a woman, train a whole community." Two actionable steps were identified to further elevate women's voices in peace and reconciliation efforts. The first step is to establish women-led dialogue platforms. Through storytelling and shared experiences, these platforms contribute to rebuilding trust across divided communities, rehumanising the "other", countering hate speech, and promoting empathy. They have proven successful in contexts such as Northern Ireland and are central to organisations like Women Wage Peace and Women of the Sun.

The second step is to promote grassroots women's inclusion in decision-making. Formal peace talks or top-down processes often exclude the voices of those most affected by conflict, particularly women at the grassroots level. This exclusion results in solutions that lack community support and understanding. Involving women from local communities at all levels of governance is essential to bridging the gap between top-down negotiations and on-the-ground realities. The Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina serve as a powerful example of how grassroots women's movements can drive truth, jus-

tice, and reconciliation. Their success demonstrates that full inclusion is not an idealistic aspiration but a pragmatic strategy for building legitimate and durable peace.

JUSTICE AND SOLIDARITY: THE FOUNDATION FOR GENUINE COEXISTENCE

When wounds are still open and suffering runs deep, it is difficult to speak of dialogue, empathy, compassion, solidarity, and mutual care. Talking about peace and dialogue without first addressing justice is not only premature — it risks being hollow. Justice must come first. Only when violence ends will it be possible to begin a real dialogue and start imagining a future where people coexist with dignity.

Moreover, before engaging in conversations about coexistence, it is necessary to agree on the values we truly share. A genuine international dialogue must begin with this question, rooted in honesty, openness, and a readiness to reflect deeply on our diverse identities and what shared humanity means in practice.

Often overlooked, civil society is the glue that holds polarised societies together when everything else falls apart

Speaking of peace as a distant ideal while injustice persists can obscure the urgency of addressing the root causes of conflict. A focus on justice — prioritised and pursued collectively — may offer a more grounded path forward, one where solidarity becomes the foundation for meaningful coexistence. In the pursuit of justice and meaningful dialogue, solidarity becomes essential. In a world fractured by conflict and polarisation, it is solidarity — not superficial consensus or surface-level dialogue — that can truly bring people together. Especially for

women, solidarity can be a powerful form of political consciousness, transcending borders and divisions. It is not just about exchanging experiences; it is about building collective resistance to patriarchy and systemic injustice, from personal realities to political structures. Examples from the work of the European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA) in Tunisia and Turkey demonstrate how

women from rival political factions can collaborate in solidarity.

Women's empowerment must be grounded in this solidarity — across political differences and tensions. Civil society, often overlooked, becomes the “glue” of polarised societies, the connective tissue that holds communities together when everything else is falling apart.

UNVEILING HATE SPEECH
IN LIGHT OF THE CONFLICT.
WHICH CONDITIONS FOR
SOCIAL DIALOGUE?

The protracted crisis in the Middle East has long served as a catalyst for the spread of dehumanisation, radicalisation, and polarisation. Hate speech targeting both Jewish and Muslim communities has surged, with antisemitism and Islamophobia fuelling hostility and legitimising violence. In the Euro-Mediterranean region, Arab, Muslim, and Jewish communities are particularly vulnerable to these developments, having become prime targets for extremist rhetoric and hate-driven narratives that erode social cohesion and further complicate efforts to build sustainable peace. Alongside political initiatives aimed at resolving the conflict, it is essential to open spaces for dialogue that allow for the collective examination of these phenomena. This session sought to create such a space by addressing key issues, including the challenges of defining and regulating hate speech, the links between violent conflict and the rise of hateful narratives, and strategies to prevent social fragmentation. It further explored how, at a time when societal divisions risk becoming entrenched, we can prevent the breakdown of social dialogue while fostering the conditions for meaningful debate and disagreement.

**UNDERSTANDING HATE SPEECH:
WHAT IT IS, AND WHAT IT IS NOT**

Hate speech remains a highly complex and contested concept, lacking a universally accepted legal definition. Despite this ambiguity, it is commonly

understood as any form of communication that targets, discriminates against, or demeans individuals or groups based on inherent identity traits. These identity markers may include, but are not limited to, race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other characteristics.

Hate speech is frequently used as a tool to polarise communities, deepen societal divides, and provoke hostility against specific groups. It spreads fear, sustains harmful stereotypes, and legitimises acts of exclusion and discrimination. On a psychological level, it can dehumanise individuals, trigger trauma, and silence voices through fear and intimidation. Socially, it undermines trust, erodes cohesion, and fosters division. In its most extreme forms, hate speech has historically been linked to atrocities such as genocide and mass violence.

One of the major challenges in confronting hate speech is the absence of a universally recognised legal definition. This gap creates significant obstacles, as national and regional laws vary in how they define and regulate it. Nonetheless, some frameworks offer meaningful guidance. For instance, the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, adopted in 2019, defines hate speech as any communication — in speech, writing, or behaviour — that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language in reference to a person or group based on their identity traits.

This framework also introduces a three-tier model to classify hate speech by severity. At the highest level are expressions explicitly inciting violence, discrimination, or genocide, which are prohibited under international law. The intermediate level covers threats, harassment, or biased speech that, while not directly violent, may still justify restrictions under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights if certain conditions are met. The lowest level includes offensive or controversial statements, such as blasphemy or the denial of historical facts, which, though harmful, typically call for policy and educational responses rather than legal prohibition.

It is important to recognise that hate speech exists on a continuum. Not all harmful expression reaches the threshold for legal action, and its classification must always consider a variety of contextual factors. These include the nature of the speech itself, the political and social environment in which it is made, the speaker's influence and intent, the platform through which the message is conveyed, and the extent of its reach. A nuanced, case-by-case assessment is essential for developing responses that uphold both human dignity and freedom of expression.

Another challenge in addressing hate speech lies in the delicate balance between protecting individuals and communities and upholding the right to freedom of expression. This right is enshrined in international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Both affirm that individuals have the right to express ideas and opinions, even if such views are controversial or offensive. However, they also acknowledge that this right is not unlimited. Speech that incites discrimination or hatred against others can and should be restricted under specific, narrowly defined conditions.

In sum, while freedom of expression is a cornerstone of democratic societies, it must be exercised in ways that uphold the dignity and rights of all. Regulating

hate speech requires a careful, principled balance — one that avoids overreach but does not allow harmful and dehumanising speech to go unchecked. Understanding these distinctions and applying them consistently is crucial to safeguarding both social cohesion and democratic freedoms.

One of the key challenges in addressing hate speech is striking the delicate balance between safeguarding communities and upholding freedom of expression

VIOLENT CONFLICTS AS AMPLIFIERS OF HATE SPEECH AND POLARISATION

During violent conflicts and wars, the spread of disinformation plays a critical role in fuelling hate speech and deepening societal polarisation. False or misleading narratives often target specific groups, portraying them as threats or scapegoats for the ongoing crisis. This deliberate manipulation of public perception not only intensifies hostility but also legitimises aggressive rhetoric and actions. Hate speech is driven by a combination of emotional responses to violence and the strategic efforts of extremist actors who exploit tensions to advance their agendas. As a result, community divisions are deepened, undermining prospects for peace and coexistence.

The protracted crisis in the Middle East has long served as a catalyst for deepening communal divisions, the erosion of mutual recognition, and the spread of extremist ideologies. In particular, the events of 7 October 2023 and the subsequent military escalation in Gaza have intensified societal polarisation to unprecedented levels. In this context, hate speech targeting both Jewish and Muslim communities has increased, with both antisemitism and Islamophobia fuelling hostility and legitimising violence.

The protracted crisis in the Middle East has long served as a catalyst for deepening communal divisions, the erosion of mutual recognition, and the spread of extremist ideologies

Islamophobic narratives are increasingly prevalent, with dehumanising rhetoric often used to legitimise aggressive military actions against Palestinians. In Spain, Islamophobic and xenophobic content constitutes a significant portion of online hate speech, reflecting a broader European trend, according to data from the Spanish Observatory on Racism and Xenophobia (OBERAXE). Across Europe, far-right groups – despite a history of antisemitism – show sympathy towards the Israeli government while promoting anti-immigration and anti-Muslim narratives. OBERAXE reports that around half of monitored hate speech cases involve severe dehumanisation or degradation of the targeted group. This is particularly evident in portrayals of Palestinians, whose suffering is frequently met with apathy due to narratives that deny their humanity. The dehumanisation of Gaza's population has reinforced the perception that the destruction of Gaza was a legitimate response to the events of 7 October. While some Israeli citizens oppose Netanyahu's ideology, a significant segment of the population shows little empathy towards Gaza's civilians. Meanwhile, the international community has largely responded with silence, indifference, and inaction, demonstrating a collective inability to put an end to the violence. There has also been a rise in antisemitic incidents since October 2023, including attacks on Jewish individuals, public harassment, and online hate speech. According to a 2024 report by EQUINET, the European Network of Equality Bodies, there has been

a significant surge in antisemitic incidents in Belgium following the events of 7 October. The report, documenting cases between 7 October and 7 December 2023, highlights a stark increase: from an average of 4-5 cases per month to 91 reported cases over two months, of which 66 were confirmed cases of antisemitism. This signals a troubling rise in antisemitic sentiment and actions.

Data from OBERAXE also underscores another important dynamic: the volatility of hate speech trends in response to conflict. According to their newsletter covering October-November 2023, there was a five-point increase in hate speech cases against Jewish communities and a nine-point increase in Islamophobic cases. However, in the following bimonthly report (December-January), the number of incidents dropped sharply. This pattern suggests that while violent conflicts trigger surges in hate speech, these surges are often not sustained over time, but rather are closely tied to the emotional intensity of unfolding events. Furthermore, the data suggests that violent conflicts tend to amplify pre-existing prejudices rather than generate entirely new forms of hostility.

FIGHTING ANTISEMITISM: AGAINST DENIAL AND INSTRUMENTALISATION

Antisemitism is addressed through a combination of legal frameworks and broader societal definitions. Under legal instruments, antisemitism is typically tackled through laws related to hate speech (expressions that incite hatred, discrimination, or violence against Jewish individuals or communities), hate crime (offences motivated by antisemitic bias, including assaults, vandalism, or threats targeting Jewish people or property), and Holocaust denial (in several European countries, the denial or trivialisation of the Holocaust is criminalised as a specific manifestation of antisemitism).

Beyond the legal sphere, several non-legally binding definitions have been introduced to help identify and respond to antisemitism in more nuanced ways. Two

key definitions dominate this conversation: that of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), adopted in 2016, and the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, adopted in 2021.

The IHRA definition, while widely endorsed by bodies such as the European Union, the United States, and numerous national parliaments (including the French National Assembly in 2019), has attracted significant criticism. One of the main concerns is that the IHRA's illustrative examples blur the lines between legitimate criticism of the State of Israel and antisemitic behaviour. The examples cited tend to focus disproportionately on Israel, thereby risking the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism. This conflation can unintentionally reinforce harmful stereotypes by associating all Jews with the policies or actions of the Israeli state — a dynamic that critics argue ultimately undermines the fight against genuine antisemitism. In contrast, the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, developed by over 200 scholars from diverse fields, proposes a clearer and more operational alternative. It lays out practical guidelines to distinguish between antisemitic actions and legitimate criticism of Israel, firmly protecting the right to critique Israeli government policies, its institutional structures, and even historical narratives related to its founding, provided such criticism remains grounded in international law and does not invoke antisemitic tropes.

A meaningful struggle against antisemitism must simultaneously confront both the denial of its existence and its instrumentalisation for political purposes. By offering a more precise framework, the Jerusalem Declaration strengthens the ability to combat antisemitism without stifling free expression or mislabelling legitimate political criticism.

This distinction is particularly crucial in the current context of violence in the Middle East. Across the world, Palestinian voices are increasingly being criminalised. Accusations of antisemitism are, at times, misused to suppress valid and lawful criticism of Israeli state policies. For instance, in certain Ger-

man jurisdictions, slogans such as “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” are treated as criminal speech on the grounds that they allegedly deny Israel's right to exist. Furthermore, demonstrations against the war in Gaza have faced growing restrictions across Europe, with at least 12 EU member states either banning or limiting pro-Palestinian protests. These trends raise serious concerns about the shrinking space for civil society mobilisation and the erosion of democratic freedoms.

A meaningful struggle against antisemitism must simultaneously confront both the denial of its existence and its instrumentalisation for political purposes

FOSTERING SOCIAL COHESION THROUGH INCLUSIVE CITIZENSHIP AND INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

To strengthen the fabric of increasingly diverse societies, two principal avenues of action were identified. The first is the imperative to nurture an inclusive form of citizenship — one that allows individuals from varied cultural and religious backgrounds to feel acknowledged, valued, and protected. In today's climate, where expressions of hostility and division are on the rise, particularly affecting Jewish and Muslim communities, cities have a vital role to play in ensuring safe and respectful living environments for all. In this regard, the contributions of networks such as the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism (ECCAR) were highlighted as a model of municipal commitment to anti-racism. Established under the auspices of UNESCO, ECCAR today brings together over 150 member cities across Europe, united by a common mission to combat racism and all forms of discrimination. Through its Ten-Point Action Plan,

ECCAR provides municipalities with a strategic framework to implement inclusive policies, ranging from anti-discrimination legislation to education, housing, and employment initiatives. As a committed member, the city of Barcelona actively contributes to and benefits from this transnational platform, which facilitates the exchange of good practices and fosters a human rights-based approach to urban governance. The second key avenue is education, which emerged as a cornerstone in the response to hatred and societal fragmentation. Countering hate speech after it occurs is not enough; it must be prevented by addressing its root causes through proactive educational measures. In this regard, education plays a crucial role in cultivating inclusive attitudes and fostering resilience against hatred. Societies that promote inclusivity and equity create less fertile ground for the emergence and spread of hate speech. Global citizenship education and intercultural dialogue are vital in equipping learners with the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to embrace diversity, engage respectfully in pluralistic societies, and reject narratives of hatred. Moreover, developing media and information literacy (MIL) skills is essential in an age where digital platforms have become central to public discourse.

Media literacy, critical thinking, and digital citizenship education empower individuals to evaluate media content discerningly, understand the social and technological contexts in which information circulates, and make informed and responsible choices as users and content creators. These skills are indispensable for countering stereotypes and hate-driven narratives online.

Countering hate speech after it occurs is not enough; it must be prevented by addressing its root causes through proactive educational measures

Improving educational approaches also requires a systemic review of teaching materials. Curricula and textbooks must be scrutinised to eliminate stereotypes, biases, and language that could fuel hatred or exclusion, and to ensure they consistently reflect the principles of equality, diversity, and inclusion. Building inclusive and equitable learning environments is fundamental to fostering resilient societies and promoting long-term social cohesion.

YOUTH AND NARRATIVES
OF HATE THROUGH SOCIAL
MEDIA: HOW TO ADDRESS
THE POLARISING IMPACT
OF DISINFORMATION?

In the context of violent conflicts, where access to information is limited and reliable sources are scarce, social media platforms have become critical spaces for information – but also for the dissemination of disinformation and hate speech. Following Hamas's attack on Israel and Israel's brutal bombardment of Gaza, social media became a battleground for hate speech, including antisemitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Palestinian racism.

This session explored the influence of technology, algorithms, and social media on public discourse, particularly among younger generations, who are the most active online and often considered the most vulnerable to manipulation. The discussion also highlighted two central paradoxes: the rise of polarisation despite social media platforms' stated goals of connection, and the spread of disinformation despite the promises of an information-rich era. The panel analysed the links between hate speech and disinformation, identified emerging digital trends, and explored strategies to create safer online environments for young people.

DISINFORMATION AND HATE SPEECH: OLD PHENOMENA REDEFINED BY THE ONLINE SPHERE

Disinformation and hate speech are not new phenomena; they have existed throughout history as tools for political manipulation and warfare. While

social media platforms have dramatically amplified their reach, the spread of false or misleading information is not confined to digital spaces. Traditional media, including mainstream and legacy outlets, have also contributed, whether through biased reporting, sensationalism, or the intentional dissemination of misleading narratives.

However, disinformation and hate speech in the online sphere pose specific challenges requiring targeted responses. One major factor is the algorithmic infrastructure of social media platforms, which has significantly amplified the reach of disinformation and hate speech. These algorithms are designed to prioritise emotional content – a feature that extremist actors have learnt to exploit, particularly when targeting younger audiences. Far-right movements, in particular, have demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding of algorithmic manipulation than many other actors, successfully connecting with younger generations through tailored, provocative content, and transforming social media into fertile ground for extremist ideas.

Another crucial point is the intricate relationship between hate speech and disinformation. Although distinct phenomena, they are often interconnected and mutually reinforcing, with social media platforms acting as their main amplifier. The Council of Europe, in a 2022 recommendation to member states on combating hate speech, defined it as encompassing

all types of expression that incite, promote, spread, or justify violence, hatred, or discrimination against a person or group based on identity characteristics such as race, colour, language, religion, nationality, ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Disinformation, meanwhile, refers to the deliberate spread of false information with the intent to cause harm or to achieve political, economic, or social gain.

Moreover, disinformation in the digital sphere is rarely passive or spontaneous; it is a deliberate strategy used by both state and non-state actors to manipulate public opinion, destabilise societies, and advance political agendas. Countries such as Russia, China, and Iran have notably exploited digital platforms during crises to sow confusion and fear. Simultaneously, the rise of disinformation highlights the enormous power concentrated in the hands of tech magnates, whose platforms decisively shape public discourse and influence democratic processes.

Disinformation is not accidental – it's a deliberate strategy used by state and non-state actors to manipulate public opinion and advance political agendas

The challenge of countering disinformation is also deeply intergenerational. Although it is commonly assumed that young people are more prone to manipulation due to higher online engagement, research suggests that older generations – who did not grow up immersed in digital media – may actually be more susceptible, due to lower levels of digital literacy. Thus, the real challenge lies not purely in generational divides but in media literacy gaps across all age groups. Finally, it is essential to avoid blaming social media alone for the spread of hate and disinformation.

These platforms amplify and legitimise discourses that already exist offline; they do not create them from nothing. As previously stated, research on the Israel-Palestine conflict, for instance, demonstrates that social media has served more to amplify entrenched hatred than to generate new forms of hate.

IDEOLOGICAL HYBRIDISATION AND MAINSTREAMING OF EXTREMISM: EMERGING TRENDS IN THE ONLINE SPHERE

The online sphere is becoming increasingly hybridised, with a growing overlap between different ideological movements. At the same time, the boundaries between disinformation, conspiracy theories, hate speech, violent extremism (VE), and other forms of harmful content have become blurred – although these phenomena remain distinct. Actors and groups that may seem ideologically distant are increasingly converging around certain narratives, operating within the same digital spaces, building informal coalitions, and adopting shared communication strategies, such as leveraging conspiracy theories and extremist rhetoric to mobilise audiences.

Extremist narratives are also penetrating deeper into the social and political mainstream. Content that was once confined to fringe platforms such as 4chan, Gab, or Bitchute is now gaining traction on widely used social networks such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram. The mainstreaming of hateful ideologies is particularly concerning, as it normalises extremist discourse within broader public conversations. A 2024 report by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) warned that policy changes introduced by Elon Musk following his acquisition of X – particularly the loosening of content moderation – have directly enabled the spread of hate speech. Several organisations have withdrawn from the platform, expressing concerns that its algorithm actively promotes divisive narratives.

These developments form part of a broader pattern. The growing circulation of disinformation and fake news is closely linked to a wider distrust of political institutions and traditional media. This erosion of trust was starkly reflected in the June 2024 European elections, which saw significant breakthroughs for far-right parties across several countries. Against the backdrop of a broader crisis of liberal democracy and the rise of populist movements, multiple surveys have underscored the increasing disaffection towards political elites and institutions — especially among younger generations.

The growing circulation of disinformation and fake news is closely linked to a wider distrust of political institutions and traditional media

THE NEED FOR A MULTI-LAYERED APPROACH TO COUNTER DISINFORMATION

Countering disinformation requires tailored and context-specific approaches; there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Greater access to data from social media platforms, and transparency about how algorithms operate and shape public opinion, are essential to designing effective counter-strategies.

While individual users bear some responsibility for navigating digital spaces responsibly, the burden cannot rest solely on them. Social media companies must be held accountable for the proliferation of disinformation and hate speech. Platforms need to allocate more resources to moderating harmful content, training moderators, and complying with regulatory frameworks. In this regard, legal tools such as the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) have emerged as crucial mechanisms for enforcement. The DSA sets out obligations for online platforms,

and ongoing investigations into X, Meta, and TikTok reflect growing scrutiny.

Building societal resilience to digital threats is a key component of any effective strategy against disinformation. Digital citizenship programmes that promote media literacy, critical thinking, and a deeper understanding of how digital platforms function are essential. Such initiatives enable individuals to navigate today's news environment, recognise harmful behaviours, and make informed decisions. The aim is not to dictate what people should think but to equip them with the tools to think critically and act responsibly online.

Preventive strategies such as pre-bunking — educating the public to recognise disinformation before it takes hold — are increasingly used in educational settings. Based on the concept of "inoculation", pre-bunking exposes individuals to small doses of misleading content alongside contextual information about its sources and motives, helping them develop psychological resistance. Debunking, which involves responding to misinformation after it has spread, also plays a role, although it is often less effective due to the emotional speed at which false narratives circulate.

Building societal resilience to digital threats is a key component of any effective strategy against disinformation

It is equally important to address a deeper layer of the problem: the demand for disinformation. While efforts to counter disinformation often focus on the supply side, tackling the reasons why people seek out and share false information is critical. Addressing psychosocial vulnerabilities — such as confirmation bias, where individuals seek information

that reinforces their existing beliefs — is essential. Combating these cognitive traps is fundamental to building a more resilient, informed, and critically engaged society, capable of resisting the emotional manipulation that fuels digital radicalisation and polarisation.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON JOURNALISM: ADVOCATING A RETURN TO QUALITY JOURNALISM

The advent of social media has drastically altered the dynamics of journalism. Although propaganda has long been used as a tool of war, social media's speed and reach have amplified its effects, enabling fake news to spread much faster online than offline. As previously discussed, algorithmic infrastructure shapes how audiences perceive reality by predicting preferences and prioritising emotional content. This personalised consumption of information fuels polarisation and the creation of social bubbles.

Another mounting challenge facing traditional journalism is the widespread loss of trust in traditional media, with audiences perceiving a growing disconnect between themselves and mainstream narratives. This trend is particularly pronounced among youth, who increasingly turn to social media as their primary source of information. According to a recent Reuters survey, TikTok has become the main news source for 20% of individuals under the age of 25.

In times of disinformation and hoaxes, quality journalism is essential for confronting polarising dynamics. Many within the field advocate for a return to the principles and scientific methodologies developed over the last 40 years to restore credibility and deliver reliable narratives — especially when covering entrenched conflicts. Quality journalism rests on three key pillars:

First, it embraces journalism's watchdog role, requiring unrestricted access to events, sources, and locations. Yet, in many contemporary conflicts, including Gaza, journalists face significant barriers

that hinder their ability to obtain first-hand accounts and report with integrity.

A growing challenge for journalism is the loss of public trust and the widening gap between audiences and mainstream media

Second, quality journalism demands the application of operational criteria for meaningful reporting. Journalists must carefully deliberate on the narratives, approaches, and data they use, ensuring their work reflects a deep understanding of the context, rather than offering superficial headlines. While complete impartiality may be unattainable, systematic methods exist to structure reporting in ways that prioritise accuracy, reliability, and trustworthiness.

Finally, objectivity and responsibility are central to quality journalism. Objectivity does not equate to neutrality at all costs; rather, it involves taking informed stances to rigorously uncover the truth, particularly in contexts marked by inequality or oppression. Commitment to fairness and thorough investigation defines this professional ethic.

In addition to these traditional principles, innovative approaches such as Solutions Journalism are gaining traction. Solutions Journalism moves beyond conventional reporting by focusing on the “how” — highlighting ways in which affected communities confront and overcome challenges. By addressing polarisation and showcasing actors of change, rather than reducing individuals to mere victims or perpetrators, this approach fosters deeper, more nuanced narratives. Providing audiences with greater context and depth enables a better understanding of complex issues and promotes a sense of agency, countering the apathy often triggered by traditional conflict reporting.

THE DYSFUNCTIONS OF INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUTH RADICALISATION

The war in Gaza, coupled with the positions taken by some Western countries, has the potential to fuel the radicalisation of youth across the MENA region, reinforcing narratives of injustice. In particular, the perception of double standards in the application of international law is a major driver of radicalisation. Many young people witness what they perceive as the international legal system's failure to uphold justice in cases like Gaza, undermining their faith in non-violent resistance and international mechanisms. These individuals do not form their perspectives in isolation; rather, their worldview is shaped by a reality in which international law appears selectively applied — pushing some towards radicalised beliefs as they transition into adulthood.

Some Western governments are, often unintentionally, providing authoritarian regimes with “free ammunition” for disinformation campaigns. The Jamal Khashoggi Programme, run by the Kawakibi Foundation, which monitors disinformation networks targeting the MENA region, found that, unlike in Eastern Europe — where fake news is often manufactured —, in the MENA region, disinformation actors largely rely on real statements by Western leaders that highlight contradictions. For example, contrasting European responses to Ukraine and Gaza exposes inconsistencies in the application of principles like resistance to occupation and the defence of human rights. These disparities require no fabrication, making them par-

ticularly potent tools for manipulation. The dissemination of such narratives reinforces authoritarian propaganda and delegitimises Western values in the eyes of many in the region. Civil society actors are left with little recourse, as there is often no outright falsehood to debunk — only visible moral contradictions.

The lack of a common and coherent response to the Gaza crisis has further undermined the European Union's credibility as an interlocutor in promoting peace in the region

The lack of a common and coherent response to the Gaza crisis has further undermined the European Union's credibility as an interlocutor in promoting peace in the region, highlighting the urgent need for a paradigm shift in Euro-Mediterranean relations and in the EU's engagement with its southern neighbours. Europe's reputation as a defender of international law and human rights has been seriously damaged, creating widespread disillusionment among those who once looked to Europe as a model of justice. This reputational damage is not easily reversible. Disillusionment has taken root across a generation. Europe's failure to address these inconsistencies risks entrenching the loss of credibility, leaving it increasingly ill-equipped to advocate for human rights or counter radicalisation in the years to come.



PART IV

CALL TO ACTION

WHY EUROPE IS DOOMED WITHOUT PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Jean-Pierre Filiu. Sciences Po Paris

In light of all the debates held, the idea of reclaiming our sense of shared humanity calls for deeper reflection — both from a personal perspective and in relation to the broader European attitude.

Every hour brings news that weighs heavily on our hearts, and we are all too familiar with the pain. This is something we feel deeply within our societies, among our families, our youth, and our communities. What is happening right now goes beyond geopolitical conflict, it is a direct attack on the fundamental values that we hold dear, on the principles we live by. So, this notion of reclaiming our shared humanity becomes a key issue which has been articulated in very profound terms by Mohamed Shehada, and coming from Gaza, his words carry undeniable strength and truth.

At the same time, you may notice my attire — I'm dressed as part of civil society, in solidarity with the many movements that persist around the world. My hoodie carries a message that reads "Fight like Ukrainians", because I firmly believe in the importance of solidarity. It's not just about one conflict, but about standing with those who resist oppression, regardless of where they are. Just as we must support the Ukrainian resistance, we must also actively engage in peace efforts in the Middle East, seeking justice and human dignity for all.

Speaking about European Union, I recently heard Ursula von der Leyen, someone in a very official

capacity, speak proudly in the European Parliament. She confronted Viktor Orban by declaring, "In no language of Europe — no matter how different our languages, cultures, and feelings — does peace mean capitulation. In no language does sovereignty mean occupation." So, a Palestinian friend of mine called me saying how wonderful it was that the president of the European Commission had changed her position about Palestine. But I had to answer him, no, my dear friend, it was not about Palestine, it was only about Ukraine.

This highlights a deep issue that I describe as monophony versus stereophony. It's not just about a double standard — because double standards could be a matter of opinion. What we are dealing with here is schizophrenia, and schizophrenia is not just a divergence of opinion; it's a pathology.

By reclaiming our shared humanity, we are not only addressing an ethical issue but fighting against such a pathology. This is crucial, because, in the short term — and I don't even need to mention the long-term consequences — we are putting at risk the very foundations of what we believe the rule of law-based European Union to stand for. The unity and integrity of the EU are jeopardised when we allow this kind of inconsistency to persist.

Before we talk about the future, I want to share a message of hope from civil society, particularly in France, which I know best. Over the past year, I've

accepted numerous invitations from various sectors of society – colleges, peace rallies, business meetings, and grassroots organisations. Why? Because they all sought meaning. They wanted to understand what is happening, and they were eager for something clearer than the flood of simplistic, binary narratives, and growing hate speech.

Despite their strong convictions, these individuals from all walks of life were all respectful and tolerant. They were looking for intellectual tools to help them act. This demonstrates the enormous potential for positive involvement within civil society. While I'm most familiar with the French context, I'm confident that similar potential exists across other civil societies as well.

This demonstrates the enormous potential for positive involvement within civil society

As a historian, I draw a parallel between today's situation and what happened in 1995 in Barcelona, and what I hope today's declaration could trigger. In 1995, Europe collectively, here from Barcelona, tried to save the peace process, which had been thrown into jeopardy after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by an Israeli extremist. His death marked a pivotal moment in Israeli history, ultimately leading to the rise of Benjamin Netanyahu. Let's never forget that, even though Netanyahu emerged unscathed, the moral responsibility for that tragedy is something we must acknowledge.

Today, we know for certain that, regardless of the outcome of the US elections in November, America's role as a peace broker in the Middle East is over. There is no expectation that any future administration, even beyond Biden's, will be able to fulfil this role. This makes it all the more imperative for Europe to get its

act together. Why? Because while America, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, and the Arab regimes can all live without peace in the Middle East, Israelis, Palestinians, and Europeans cannot.

In 1995, Europe collectively, here from Barcelona, tried to save the peace process, which had been thrown into jeopardy after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by an Israeli extremist

Historians typically don't predict the future. However, from a historical perspective, I firmly believe that the Two-State Solution is the only viable solution. Why? Because this conflict is so unique and enduring, and this conflict is about one land to be divided between the two peoples who actually share it, with seven million Jews living alongside seven million Arabs. It is a moral scandal that such a conflict has lasted this long without resolution. We all know the many reasons for that, but the fundamental truth is that there is no military solution to this conflict, a conflict that can only be settled through a territorial compromise. Instead of the current lose-lose cycle of endless violence, we must go for the only solution, the win-win solution, the Two-State Solution.

We've witnessed that every supposed military victory by Israel has been, in reality, a political defeat in the short and long-run. For any resolution to be meaningful, it must offer a clear and viable future. The Two-State Solution is the only path forward, but it must be implemented. And no, we haven't truly tried it yet. The European Union only officially endorsed the Two-State Solution in 1999, by which time it may have already been too late to save the Rabin-Arafat led peace process. Now, we know what must be done. We understand the objective, and it's time to act

Now, we know what must be done. We understand the objective, and it's time to act swiftly. Not just words, statements and declarations, but actions and initiatives that are the only way to give back a modicum of meaning to our words

swiftly. Not just words, statements and declarations, but actions and initiatives that are the only way to give back a modicum of meaning to our words.

We need to first secure a ceasefire in Gaza, not tomorrow, now, before it is too late for both peoples. And for such a ceasefire to last, we must launch a proactive diplomatic and political mobilisation aimed at reaching a Two-State Solution. This is not just about the Israelis and Palestinians — it's about saving both peoples, and we must work together to achieve it as soon as possible. Because, even if the rest of the world can manage to live without peace in the Middle East, Israelis and Palestinians cannot, and Europeans cannot.

(NOT) SOMEONE ELSE'S
PROBLEM: SHARED
HUMANITY AND CIVIL
SOCIETY IN ISRAEL
AND PALESTINE

Eli Osheroff. The Regional Thinking Forum

The existence of civil society is often considered a benchmark of democracy, liberalism, and progressive politics. From a European perspective, a vibrant civil society — like the one Israel enjoyed for decades — is seen as evidence of a state capable of making democratic and legitimate choices. A civil society that criticises the government, for example, signals respect for international law and grants the country legitimacy in the global arena — such as the right to demand non-interference in its internal affairs.

In discussions of the relationship between Europe, Israel, and the Palestinians, Israel's civil society helps sustain a distinction between the “outside” and the “inside”. Because Israel is viewed as a democracy (with civil society as proof), it is believed that Israelis alone should determine their political future — which inevitably includes decisions about the fate of the Palestinians.

Europe's progressive segments often aspire to see peace and stability in the Middle East. At the same time, they are deeply dissatisfied with Israeli policies over the past 15 years under Netanyahu. Israeli civil society, then, becomes a way to square the circle: support democratic Israelis so that they might push for change from within their democratic state. According to this logic, Israel, as a liberal democracy, should eventually choose to end the occupation and agree to the creation of a Palestinian state.

This dichotomy between “inside” and “outside”, which Israeli civil society helps maintain, reflects the realpolitik of the European political class. The status of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank under Israeli occupation remains, in effect, an internal Israeli issue.

Israeli civil society, then, becomes a way to square the circle: support democratic Israelis so that they might push for change from within their democratic state

This distinction has deep historical roots. It reflects Europe's post-Holocaust commitment to the Jewish people and reinforces the political project of Jewish sovereignty outside of Europe — driven by a mix of ideology, guilt, indifference, and political interest. But this is ultimately a false dichotomy. It neither contributes to peace nor serves the interests of any genuinely progressive force, in Europe or the Middle East.

I am writing these words around a year and a half after the Hamas-led attack of 7 October — an event that triggered Israel's campaign to devastate Gaza. This campaign has included the destruction of entire

neighbourhoods, the killing of tens of thousands of people, and, at the time of writing, the implementation of policies that amount to starvation. These acts, unprecedented in the scale of their destruction, have not brought security or resolution. If anything, they highlight the failure of the existing framework.

But this is ultimately a false dichotomy. It neither contributes to peace nor serves the interests of any genuinely progressive force, in Europe or the Middle East

To find a way out, I suggest reframing the conflict — not as something external to Europe, but as something internal to it. This is true historically, ideologically, and politically.

As a historian of the Middle East, I emphasise that Zionism and the establishment of Israel could not have occurred without Europe's long history of Jewish persecution. While Jews in Europe experienced periods of prosperity, the idea of creating a Jewish state as a solution to the "Jewish question" is distinctly modern, and European in origin.

When I travel through Europe today, I am often struck by how many of my interlocutors — especially those who identify as liberal or progressive — share Israeli liberal Zionist assumptions. They condemn the Hamas attacks of 7 October (rightly so), but often decontextualise them, viewing them as expressions of a "Clash of Civilizations" rather than the product of years of occupation, siege, and despair. This was most evident in the immediate reaction of European leaders, who rushed to express unconditional support for Israel, even as the death toll in Gaza quickly surpassed Israel's. These statements may have been intended as solidarity, but they ultimately paved the way for unchecked violence.

Israel was not under existential threat. If there was anything pro-Israel to be done at that moment, it was to demand restraint — not to give carte blanche for a campaign of revenge. Supporting a policy of total destruction of the Palestinians in Gaza is not only morally indefensible; allowing the Jewish state to continue its campaign of external aggression and internal self-destruction may itself be a form of anti-semitism.

This vision — of Jews and Arabs "settling their differences" beyond Europe's borders — is precisely the dream scenario for both anti-Semites and Islamophobes. Europe thus absolves itself of responsibility while reinforcing the narrative that Jews and Muslims do not belong. But what is happening in Gaza today could not have happened without Europe's own history of exclusion, violence, and fear of the "other". Zionism, in its broadest sense, is the belief that Jewish sovereignty outside of Europe is the solution to the Jewish problem. From this perspective, it is not merely an Israeli idea but a Western one — embedded in the policies, guilt, and imagination of the Global North.

This ideological underpinning is evident in European support for Israeli civil society. Funding NGOs, human rights defenders, and investigative journalism allows Europe to claim it is aiding Israeli democracy. These initiatives are important (and I write this as a freelancer in this sector) but they cannot replace demands for accountability from the Israeli state as a whole. When support for civil society becomes a substitute for political pressure, it becomes a fig leaf. It conceals European complicity under the guise of liberal virtue. What is urgently needed is enforcement of international law. Of course, Palestinians must be held accountable too. But their accountability is often assumed a priori: Hamas is designated a terrorist organisation; its leaders are pursued for war crimes, only to be assassinated by Israel before ever reaching trial.

When support for civil society becomes a substitute for political pressure, it becomes a fig leaf

There is also a practical reason why the “outside/inside” distinction no longer holds: geography. The Middle East is Europe's neighbour. There is no physical barrier separating the regions. As seen with Syria, a civil war and regime collapse in the Middle East leads to waves of refugees — refugees who will not be arriving in the US, Canada, or Australia, but in Europe. For many of these immigrants — Arabs or otherwise — Palestine is a central issue, emotionally and politically. European Middle East policy is, inescapably, domestic policy.

Treating this crisis as someone else's problem — something Arabs and Jews must sort out among themselves — is not only irresponsible toward them, but toward Europe. A responsible approach would acknowledge this entanglement. It would include continued support for civil society and humanitarian

relief, but within a larger framework: one that centres legal accountability and a political solution. It would treat the rule of law not as an optional ideal, but as the foundation of a shared humanity.

Civil society plays an important role — in advocacy, human rights defence, and local analysis — but the harsh truth is that our work is no substitute for European responsibility

Instead of channelling guilt into support for Israeli NGOs or humanitarian aid to Palestinians, Europe must adopt a responsible approach. This does not mean abandoning such efforts. It means embedding them within a broader strategy that includes real political pressure and legal accountability. Civil society plays an important role — in advocacy, human rights defence, and local analysis — but the harsh truth is that our work is no substitute for European responsibility.

LEGAL FOUNDATIONS
AND LIVED REALITIES:
A PALESTINIAN CALL FOR
“CONVIVENCIA” AND JUSTICE

Zaha Hassan. Carnegie Centre for International Peace

At a time of intensifying crisis in the Middle East, the concept of “shared humanity” has become more urgent than ever. Yet, for many Palestinians – particularly those living outside the region – the absence of that shared humanity is deeply felt. As both a Palestinian and a resident of the United States, this moment exposes a stark contrast between political rhetoric and lived reality. In the US, the idea of dedicating multiple days to a public conversation on shared humanity in the context of the Middle East feels nearly unimaginable. The current climate is defined by heightened polarisation, restricted civic space, and a reluctance to even broach the question of Palestinian human dignity.

This moment exposes a stark contrast between political rhetoric and lived reality

The setting of this conference in Spain evokes powerful associations. Spain has long carried symbolic meaning – as a place of historic *convivencia*, where Muslims, Christians, and Jews once lived together in a shared community. While this coexistence is often romanticised, it represents a moment in time when difference was not only tolerated, but integrated into a shared civic life.

Standing in Spain today as a Palestinian evokes not only admiration for this legacy, but also a deep sense of loss. The landscape, especially in the south, mirrors that of the West Bank: olive groves, rolling hills, village rooftops, and church steeples that feel like home. And yet, Palestine remains a place where full belonging is structurally denied – a place where citizenship remains elusive, where movement is restricted, and where displacement can occur at any time, without recourse.

Standing in Spain today as a Palestinian evokes not only admiration for this legacy, but also a deep sense of loss

The Spanish word *convivencia*, heard during the conference, resonates strongly. It carries not only the idea of tolerance, but also of reason – living together not by necessity or indifference, but through intentional coexistence grounded in mutual understanding. While the English term “tolerance” often implies passive endurance, *convivencia* reflects a more reasoned and active engagement. In this sense, it becomes a framework for understanding what is lacking in today’s discourse on Palestine – in both Gaza and the West Bank. The imposition of a

blockade on over two million people, the repeated forced displacements, the replacement of one community by another — these actions defy any principle of *convivencia*. And yet they are tolerated by much of the international community. The absence of such coexistence in one part of the world signals a loss of humanity elsewhere. The erosion of shared humanity in Palestine is not contained — it reverberates outward.

Upholding human rights and humanitarian law is not optional. It is central to maintaining a world in which everyone can live with safety, dignity, and hope

Reclaiming that shared humanity means reaffirming the relationship between human dignity and the rule of law. Following the mass atrocities of the First and Second World Wars, the international community codified legal frameworks to protect civilians, uphold basic rights, and set limits on wartime conduct. These rules were intended to protect the most fundamental aspects of our humanity. And yet, those same principles are being disregarded today, in plain sight. When a population composed in large part of children — half of Gaza's population — faces starvation and siege, the world is not only witnessing a humanitarian catastrophe; it is witnessing a legal and moral failure.

The international legal order is not merely a technical framework; it is the embodiment of humanity's hard-won lessons. Its disregard erodes not only the safety of the immediate victims but also the credibility of the global system itself. Upholding human rights and humanitarian law is not optional. It is central to maintaining a world in which everyone can live with safety, dignity, and hope.

Ironically, in the United States, public awareness of Palestinian rights has grown, particularly among younger generations. There is a rising recognition that Palestinians and Israeli Jews are entitled to equal rights and equal dignity. At the very moment this awareness is expanding, civic space is shrinking. A core theme of this conference has been the restriction of civic spaces — and this is acutely visible in the US context. On university campuses — historically the birthplace of civil rights movements and transformative policy shifts — speech critical of war in Gaza is increasingly suppressed. Academic freedom is being denied, and the space for critical engagement is narrowing.

Beyond the academy, social media platforms have imposed disproportionate moderation on speech relating to Palestinian experiences and human rights claims. In traditional media, essential historical and legal context is frequently omitted. These patterns are not accidental; they are part of a deliberate narrowing of public discourse. They reflect a discomfort with acknowledging equal suffering and shared humanity — especially during times of war.

At the very moment this awareness is expanding, civic space is shrinking

The dehumanisation of Palestinians is not a byproduct of conflict, it is a condition for its continuation. When speech that affirms the equal humanity of Palestinians is censored, it signals a deeper unwillingness to reckon with the political structures that sustain inequality. That dehumanisation often intensifies in moments of crisis, when moral clarity is most needed. It is precisely during the fog of war that the most egregious violations of humanity occur, under cover of confusion, silence, or complicity.

Reclaiming shared humanity today requires a recommitment to reason, law, and solidarity

Convivencia is not simply a nostalgic ideal. It is a principle that must be reclaimed and reimagined for our

time. Reclaiming shared humanity today requires a recommitment to reason, law, and solidarity. Reclaiming shared humanity today requires a recommitment to reason, law, and solidarity. It demands protection of civic space, especially in democracies that claim to uphold freedom of expression. And it calls for the recognition that what happens in one part of the world — whether in Palestine, Israel, or beyond — ultimately shapes who we are everywhere else.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Muhammad Shehada. Visiting Fellow, ECFR

It is critical to be here in Spain — a place that carries a deep, mutual history and a unique shared destiny for Muslims, Jews, and Christians. It is also a place marked by shared trauma, which, I believe, is one of our strongest unifying forces. This very intimate experience with pain, dispossession, subjugation, runs through much of our political ideology and argumentation. We must acknowledge that people are hurting — and that this pain is surfacing and manifesting in many different ways.

Why are we here today? That is the first question I would like to reflect on.

I am from Gaza. I know this topic feels repetitive to many — it has persisted for longer than I have been alive. Many of you here have worked on it for decades, and it often seems to be the same pattern repeating itself. “Complicated”. Unresolved. But this moment is not just another passing escalation.

In Gaza, we measure our age by how many wars we have survived. I have lived through 10 Israeli military operations, three wars, and two full-scale invasions. Yet none of those experiences compares to what is happening now. By any measure — scale, magnitude, severity — this is unprecedented. The destruction is total. The death toll, the killing of journalists, humanitarian workers, numbers now being described in Guinness Record terms. And above all, the systematic dismantling of international law and humanitarian principles. This is what brings us together.

In Gaza, we measure our age by how many wars we have survived

Another layer of this tragedy is the reality that many Gazans never had a chance to truly live. One of the most painful aspects of hearing about the death of a relative, a friend, or a loved one is knowing they died before they even experienced life. No past, no present, no future. Trapped to languish and die in isolation and abandonment. And I sensed echoes of that pain here.

Gaza has also become a global symbol of repression. Beyond the region, we are witnessing an unprecedented clampdown on freedoms: of expression, of solidarity, of protest. And at the same time, Gaza is galvanising people around the world.

What I share here is based on the exchanges I've had with many of you — over 200 civil society organizations represented in this space. I will not share any confidences, but I did sense a common despair, a collective shock, and widespread pain in nearly every conversation. At the same time, I felt something rare: a powerful energy to act, to demand change, and to stop the genocide in Gaza. That response was profoundly moving.

It is painful to witness how quickly a word can strip someone of their humanity. One word — “human

shield”, “collateral damage”, “terrorist” — and their life no longer matters.

It is painful to witness how quickly a word can strip someone of their humanity

Meanwhile, many words are losing their meaning and becoming hollow or even offensive. That is dangerous. Among the words people expressed discomfort with here were: “tolerance”, “coexistence”, “peace”, “radicalisation”, “Middle East conflict”, “Global South”, “Two-State Solution”, “peace process”, “negotiations”, and even “ceasefire”. These terms have become empty platitudes.

There is also a deep and shared sense of distrust: in the international community, in the institutions meant to uphold international law, in traditional media, in governments, in diplomacy, and even in international law itself.

Yet, amidst this crisis of language, new terms are emerging — terms that unite, energise, and inspire belief. “Solidarity” has become more powerful than “peace.” Others include “equality”, “justice”, “rights”, and “citizenship” — in contrast to older paradigms like “security” or “nation-state.”

Another urgent need many people voiced here was to highlight the asymmetry of suffering. Yes, suffering exists on both sides — Israel and Palestine — but it is not equivalent. It is rooted in a long history of subjugation, dispossession, domination, and control.

We had four sessions. I will summarise each briefly.

SECURITY

The first session addressed security and the need to rethink it from the ground up — from our very ontological lens. Many speakers and participants emphasised this point.

Security is not the path to peace. It is not the solution to armed resistance or terrorism. A comprehensive study by the RAND corporation titled “How terrorist groups end” showed that only 7% of non-state armed actors were ever defeated militarily.

There is an ongoing obsession among Western leaders with the idea of security — especially with forms such as permanent, predictive, or absolute security. This obsession has gone too far. As even Sarah Palin once said, “If we strive for absolute security, we will not have freedom anymore.” The message is clear: we must begin with peace, not security. Peace should be grounded in respect, rights, and citizenship. Security should follow as a result — not serve as a precondition.

We must begin with peace, not security

FEMINISM

The second session focused on feminism. As was noted during the discussion, Sweden’s Foreign Minister Margot Wallström once said, “More women, greater peace.” It is a powerful statement — but not one based on essentialising stereotypes about women being more peaceful or caring.

If we consider current leadership in major defence companies or high-level political figures in Brussels or Berlin, it becomes clear that such generalisations do not hold for everyone. The point is more fundamental: women are half of society. Excluding them from peace processes renders those efforts incomplete. Feminist approaches are inclusive and intersectional. They view people not just as victims but as agents of change. Women experience oppression intimately and combat it continuously, both personally and politically.

This ties closely to the importance of youth participation. Feminist thinking calls for inclusive

leadership and full political engagement — not token quotas, but true representation. It also recognises that feminism in Gaza or the Middle East cannot be equated with liberal Western models. Local context matters deeply.

It is not enough to allow women to enter processes designed by men. Offering limited choices is not real inclusion. What is needed is co-leadership, co-design, and collective vision-building. Additionally, there is a need for robust solidarity networks and shared resources to overcome structural barriers.

It is not enough to allow women to enter processes designed by men

HATE SPEECH AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The third session focused on hate speech and the digital environment. The burden of addressing hate speech cannot fall solely on civil society.

It is unjust to expect that women, by virtue of being caring, or youth, by virtue of being progressive, should shoulder this responsibility alone. A comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach is essential, one that addresses the issue from all angles simultaneously. There was strong emphasis on the importance of data and clearer definitions — on Islamophobia, anti-Palestinian hate, and related forms of discrimination. The weaponisation of one people's suffering to silence another people's suffering must stop. We need definitions that do not shut down dialogue but foster it, definitions that are clear, inclusive, and resistant to abuse.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLARISATION

The final session revisited the role of social media in shaping public discourse. Several participants defended the positive potential of these platforms, particularly regarding access.

When governments fail, when politicians dehumanize victims, and when traditional media amplifies bias or omits critical stories, social media fills the gap. In Gaza, where foreign journalists are banned and local ones killed, social media becomes the only tool for visibility.

For many of us, including myself, social media has been transformative. Born into the blockade, we have no access to the outside world. Our only way out is digital, through networks, alliances, and digital citizenship.

Social media is not inherently harmful. It reflects both online and offline realities. It may amplify pre-existing bias, but those biases often originate offline, in people's hearts and minds.

There is also growing mistrust of traditional media, especially among youth. Research suggests that older generations are more vulnerable to disinformation. Yet we all know someone who shares dubious content — we've all received those infamous "Nigerian prince" messages.

Our only way out is digital, through networks, alliances, and digital citizenship

The closing discussion emphasised the need to reclaim online spaces. To push back against corporate algorithms designed to profit from outrage. It is possible to build online communities grounded in solidarity. Gaza offers a vivid example of that effort.

We now turn to the reading of the Barcelona Declaration with my colleague Viviane. We have done our best to include as many perspectives as possible. I believe the document captures about 90% of your preferences and expectations. Let us not dwell on the few disagreements but instead focus on what can unite us.



ANNEXES

BARCELONA DECLARATION FOR RECLAIMING OUR SHARED HUMANITY

29 October 2024

In the framework of the Euro-Med Civil Society Conference held in Barcelona on 26 & 27 October 2024, the Declaration for Reclaiming Our Shared Humanity has been opened for civil society endorsements. The Declaration aims to protect civic spaces for constructive and inclusive dialogue to counter unprecedented polarisation and dehumanisation driven by the escalating violence in the Middle East. This declaration is based on the core values of justice, equal rights, respect for international law and solidarity.

Those who sign this declaration commit to utilize the unique Euro-Mediterranean Civil Society framework and adopt a “bonding strategy” to foster more relational and pluralistic societies, and a cooperative, empathetic, and respectful relationship between countries.

PREAMBLE

We, representatives of civil society, gather at a moment of profound threat to our common humanity. We stand at the edge of the abyss. As we write, Gaza is facing untold horror – starvation and ethnic cleansing – while violence and conflict has engulfed the Middle East. This horrific escalation has unleashed “a war of narratives” that fans the flames of antisemitism and islamophobia, as well as anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian hatreds. Cohesion within and between our societies is fracturing, and the rule of

law and international peace and security are being undermined.

We gather to call on people of conscience who share our concern to help reweave the connective tissue that binds us as a human family.

We gather to reclaim our shared humanity against conflict-driven polarisation, dehumanisation, and hate speech.

We refuse to stand by idly as our societies are dragged further into darkness, and our peoples – whether in the Middle East or in Europe – are forced to suffer continuous trans-generational injustice, trauma, and pain. We are shocked that most Western governments neither condemn nor intervene to stop mass atrocity crimes, as if our most fundamental human rights and humanitarian principles are meaningless.

Responding to the calamity of World War II and the Holocaust, the nations of the world founded the United Nations, adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and signed international treaties to regulate interstate relations, protect our rights, and safeguard both individual and collective freedoms. Yet these collective achievements are being ignored and undermined before our eyes. Without the rigorous and impartial enforcement of international law and accountability for those who perpetrate atrocity crimes, impunity thrives, and justice becomes an exception rather than the rule.

The majority of peoples of the Euro-Mediterranean region consistently indicate that they support international law, seek an end to the current violence, and desire the peaceful resolution of conflicts. They rightly fear that the post-World War II order constructed to protect us, and our rights are wilfully being torn down for the sake of racialized geopolitics.

So far, too many political leaders have failed to live up to the expectations of their publics and the stakes of international law, thereby disregarding elementary principles of our common humanity and violating their mandate. In view of this failure, confidence in our governments and in global governance is diminishing. This situation presents nothing less than a state of emergency.

Civil society is now forced to remind world leaders of their duties and solemn commitments to international law and humanitarian norms. We, therefore, stand together now to assert the following declarations and demands,

We declare:

1. We firmly believe that all peoples of the region, including Israeli Jews and Palestinians are entitled to self-determination, should live in freedom and dignity, free from any form of terror and violence, and enjoy equal rights and full citizenship.
2. We strongly reject illegal occupation, mass incarceration, the taking of civilians as hostages, indiscriminate bombing, displacement, and starvation as a weapon of war anywhere and at all times.
3. We strongly condemn all forms of violence directed against civilians, including on 7 October 2023, as well as decades of occupation, settlement policies, and home demolitions, and demand the prosecution of violators of international humanitarian law regardless of the identity of perpetrators or victims.
4. We strongly reject all forms of racism, discrimination, dehumanization or hate speech against any group of people based on their objectified identities and national, ethnic or religious origins, particularly during violent conflict.
5. We reject the exploitation of the memory of one crime to vilify protest against another. We oppose the use of antisemitism accusations, often invoking the IHRA Working Definition of antisemitism, for political goals. We acknowledge initiatives like The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA) and others that seek a better approach and distinguish between antisemitism and legitimate criticisms of the conduct of the State of Israel.
6. We recall that the current escalation in the Middle East occurs against the background of a comprehensive regional peace offer, the Arab Peace Initiative (API) of 2002, in line with international law and continuously endorsed by 57 Arab and Muslim states, which has been ignored by the Israeli government for the past 22 years.

On the basis of these principles, we call for:

7. The immediate implementation of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) provisional measures ruling to stop the killing in the Gaza strip, to dramatically surge the entry of humanitarian aid at scale, and to ensure release of the hostages.
8. All EU and Euro-Mediterranean states and institutions to no longer fuel the escalation of armed conflict by providing weapons to the belligerent parties.
9. The immediate and nonselective enforcement of international law, consistent with the ICJ Advisory Opinion of 2024 on the illegality of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, and the immediate implementation of the UNSC resolution 1701 from 2006.
10. The immediate, unhindered access of international journalists to Gaza, the protection of local

media workers, as well as full cooperation with UN-mandated investigators in line with legally binding orders of the ICJ.

11. States to denounce and take all necessary action against any public and private pressure campaigns and/or access restrictions impacting freedom of the press.
12. Regulatory authorities and social media companies to assume their responsibility to counter polarisation, dehumanisation, and radicalisation driven by misinformation and algorithms; and for the media to ensure professional, ethical and fact-based reporting providing all relevant information and context.
13. Full respect for the right to education in a safe environment, particularly for the displaced.
14. Advancing women's agency, empowerment, decision-making and representation in peacebuilding and in all matters concerning the future of their people, in compliance with UNSC 1325, fully incorporating a gender perspective and reclaiming the principle of feminist-led foreign policy.
15. Governments to support academic freedom and lift impediments on free speech that effectively restrict cooperation and repress activism in support of human rights and a just peace between Palestinians and Israelis.
16. To provide protections in law for artists, writers, academics, and those who advocate for peace and understanding or who protest the war in order to prevent the organized campaigns aimed at silencing them.
17. The use of available infrastructure, instruments, and resources and the creation of needed new ones to foster networks of solidarity and dialogue between civil society actors across the Euro-Mediterranean region to reclaim our shared humanity, and civil society peacebuilders and activists in the Middle East.
18. Support a civil-society-led peace process through the creation of citizens assemblies in the region, composed of randomly selected citizens, representing their society in the broadest possible ways across generations and social background. These assemblies should pave the way for a peace-assembly bringing together Palestinians, Israeli Jews, and neighbouring peoples.

This declaration expresses a collective commitment for reclaiming our shared humanity by refusing the logic of war and its ramifications through conflict-driven polarisation, dehumanisation, and hate speech. The implementation of this declaration will be ensured by the establishment of a "Euro-Mediterranean Advisory Council on Reclaiming our Shared Humanity" tasked to monitor next steps and develop an action plan to implement these demands.

